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Mapping Common Crime

Jason L. Payne and Fiona Hutton

Public perceptions of crime and safety are shaped by a number of factors, not least the extent to which crime statistics are publicised across a range of media formats. In a national survey, more than 8 in every 10 Australian adults rated television and newspapers as very or fairly important sources of their information about crime (Roberts and Indermaur 2009), while in a more recent New Zealand survey, an equivalent proportion of respondents also considered TV news and hard copy or online newspapers to be reliable sources of information about crime (Colmar Brunton 2014). Although there remains some debate about whether traditional and social media actually portray an accurate picture of crime, there nevertheless exists some compelling evidence of disproportionate, inaccurate, and often sensationalised media coverage of atypical crimes, including offences such as homicide or acts of sexual violence carried out by strangers in public places (Duffy et al. 2008; Garvey 2003).

Coupled with a reliance on the media as a principal source of information about crime, the potential misuse and misinterpretation of official crime statistics can have significant consequences. As Davis and Dossetor (2010) argue, the inaccurate reporting of specific criminal incidents or crime statistics

Jason L. Payne (✉)
Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
e-mail: jason.payne@anu.edu.au

F. Hutton
Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
e-mail: fiona.hutton@vuw.ac.nz

can play an important role in shaping community misperceptions about crime. Their study shows that the overwhelming majority of Australians held incorrect views about national crime trends, with 9 in 10 respondents convinced that crime was increasing or stable over a period of time when crime was actually in considerable decline. In New Zealand, similar issues have been noted. Nearly three-quarters of respondents believed that violent crime and youth crime had increased (Colmar Brunton 2014; see also Paulin et al. 2003) despite youth crime being at its lowest level for 20 years (Ministry of Justice 2013), and the fact that overall recorded crime rates have decreased since 1996 from 477,596 recorded offences in 1996 to 350,389 in 2014 (NZ Police 2015). This overestimation of crime is also somewhat at odds with the fact that most New Zealand residents considered the crime problem of their *local* community to be less concerning than the *national* crime problem (Bradley et al. 2010). In the 2014 New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey (NZCASS), 69% of respondents did not think that crime was a problem in their own neighbourhood (Ministry of Justice 2015).

With the general public holding distorted perceptions about crime, there is a real risk of inappropriate policy prioritisation and the misguided targeting of resources. Fear of crime has the potential to be as big a threat as crime itself, with public (mis)perceptions fuelling fears about particular types of crimes and offenders (Sparks 1992). Underpinning these complex debates is a series of important questions about the nature and scope of crime reporting, in particular, the preparation, publication, and presentation of crime statistics, and the stories they tell about common and infrequent crimes. Through a critical lens, this chapter explores those crimes depicted in Australia and New Zealand as the most common in officially recorded police statistics. Using illustrative examples and case studies, it is suggested that greater caution is needed to ward against an overreliance on official crime estimates as the principal vehicle for public and policy debate in both countries.

Common Crimes

Although there is no universally agreed definition of common crimes, information about crimes which are apparently common has never been more accessible to the general public. With widespread access to the Internet, a simple search for crime statistics will identify a source for the most recent, publicly available information. In New Zealand, national data are available through both the NZ Police and Statistics New Zealand. In Australia, the complexities of federation mean that while state—and territory-specific data may be reported by the relevant police agencies, the compilation of national

crime data is solely undertaken by the ABS. In both countries, these data are reported either as a unique count of offenders or of victims of crime. Both data sources are needed, since not all crimes involve personal victimisation—for example, drug offences—and not all incidents of victimisation result in the identification and apprehension of an offender.

Australia

For offender counts, two data sources are available. The first counts the number of unique offenders according to the most serious or principal offence for which they were apprehended. There were 411,686 unique offenders in the financial year 2014–2015. The four crime types for which there was the highest number of unique offenders were illicit drug offences, acts intended to cause injury, public order offences, and theft offences (ABS 2015a) (Fig. 8.1).

Rather than counting unique offenders, the second data source presents a count of the number of times each unique offender is proceeded against, either through court or non-court action such as diversion. This data set is only compiled for six of the eight states and territories, excluding the Northern Territory and Western Australia. In the financial year 2014–2015,

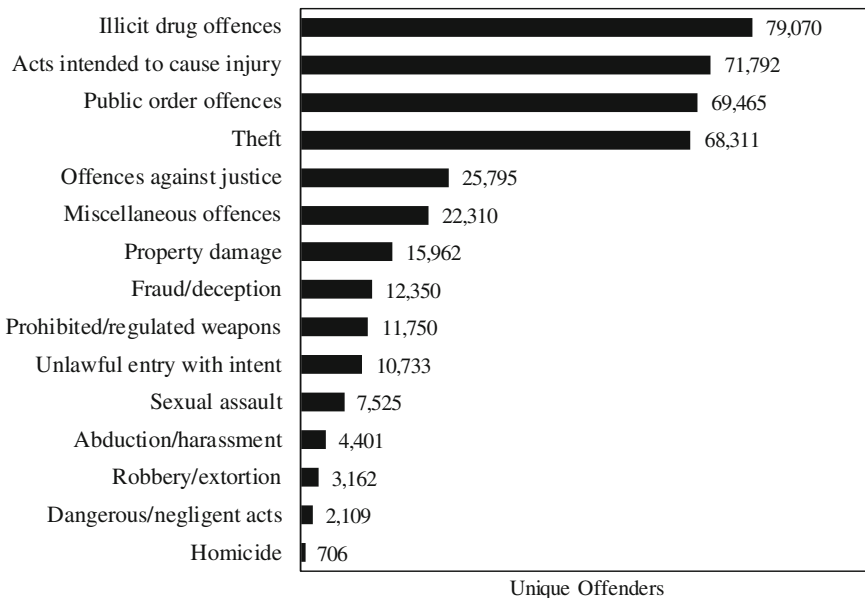


Fig. 8.1 Unique offenders (number) by offence type (Australia, 2014/2015). *Source* Adapted from Recorded Crime: Offenders, Australia (ABS 2015a)

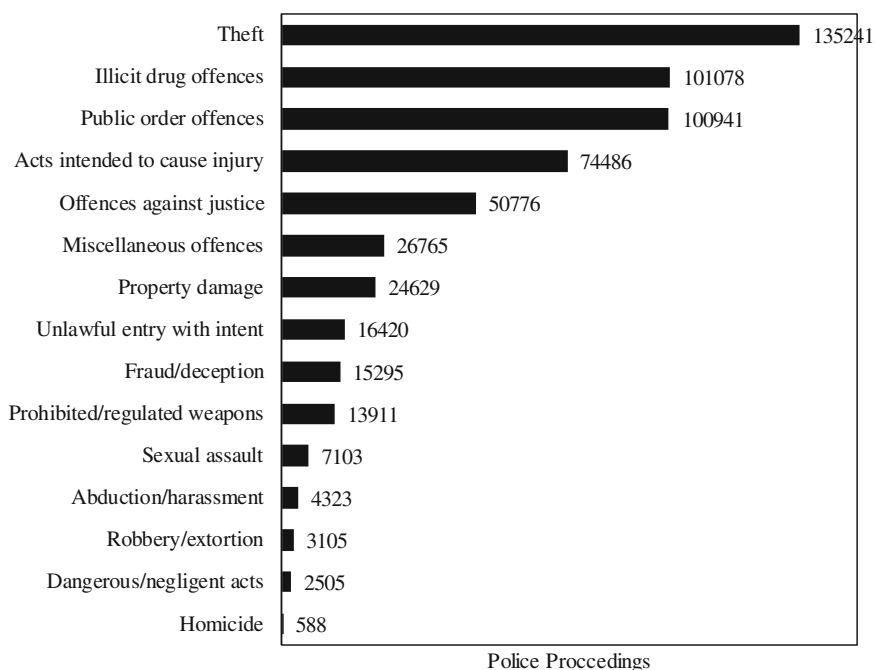


Fig. 8.2 Offenders proceeded against (number) by offence type (Australia, 2014/2015). *Note* Data excludes Western Australia and the Northern Territory *Source* Adapted from Recorded Crime: Offenders, Australia (ABS 2015a)

a total of 585,453 offenders were proceeded against by police, and the three most common offence types were theft, illicit drug, and public order offences (ABS 2015a) (Fig. 8.2).

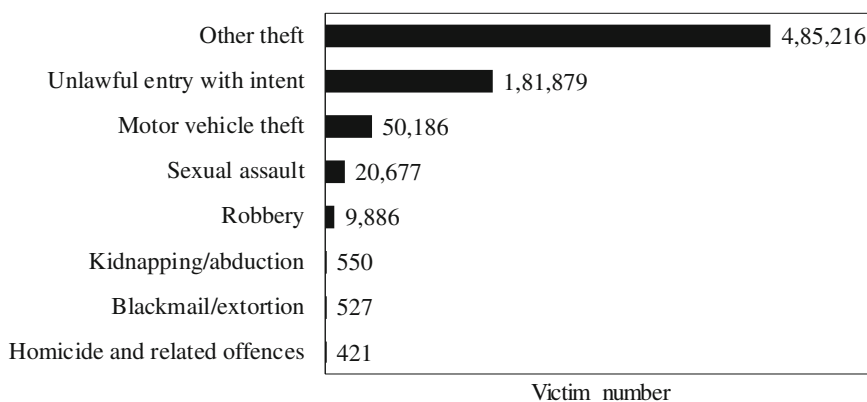


Fig. 8.3 Victims of crime (number) by offence type (Australia, 2014/2015). *Source* Adapted from Recorded Crime: Victims, Australia (ABS 2015b)

As indicated earlier, victim data provide a rich and alternative insight into the nature and extent of crime in both countries. Unlike offender counts, victim data exclude offences for which there was no victim but include those crimes for which there was a victim report of victimisation. An incident of victimisation may be counted for any person, premises, organisation, or motor vehicle against which an offence was committed and reported. In 2014, there were a total of 717,281 victimisations, with theft far outnumbering the victims of sexual assault and robbery (ABS 2015b). Of the theft victims, the largest subgroup was the victims of ‘other theft’, followed by burglary (Fig. 8.3).¹

New Zealand

In New Zealand, the way common crimes are counted has recently changed. Until 2014, national police statistics were reported twice a year. These statistics reported on recorded offences, that is, matters reported to or discovered by police where it was believed an offence was likely to have taken place (NZ Police 2015). The most common crimes under this system are noted in Table 8.1.

There are some interesting issues to note about the crimes that make up these most common categories of offending recorded by NZ Police. The category *theft and related offences* includes a large number—approximately 50,000 offences—of motor vehicle thefts. The *property damage and environmental pollution* category is almost exclusively made up of property damage offences such as vandalism and graffiti with only few offences relating to environmental pollution. The *illicit drugs offences* category is largely made up of possession offences. All of the crimes recorded in this category are what is referred to as ‘drug defined crimes’: crimes that are committed because the use, possession, manufacture, cultivation, dealing, and trafficking of some drugs are

Table 8.1 Recorded offences New Zealand 2012–2014

ASOC division Description	Recorded 2012	Recorded 2013	Recorded 2014
Theft and related offences	119,476	121,035	119,323
Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter	52,937	52,247	53,265
Property damage and environmental pollution	48,901	45,577	40,358
Acts intended to cause injury	40,851	39,447	39,944
Public order offences	42,522	35,850	26,751
Illicit drugs offences	20,792	16,069	16,543

Source Adapted from NZ Police (2015, 5)

illegal under the law (Coomber et al. 2013). Furthermore, proactive policing campaigns focussing on particular crimes can affect the official statistics with a larger number of crimes than usual being recorded. For example, in 2008, New Zealand introduced the STOP (stop tagging our place) strategy with both media and police focussing on graffiti and tagging offences.

From 2014, NZ Police changed the way they recorded offences. Under this system, Recorded Offender Statistics (RCOS) count how many times police take action against offenders, that is, charges, warnings, court action, etc. Each separate occasion that the police proceed against an offender is recorded in the RCOS. The most common crimes under this new system were traffic—and vehicle-related offences, acts intended to cause injury, and theft and related offences (Statistics New Zealand 2016).

In 2014, NZ Police also introduced a new method of counting victims of crime, using Recorded Crime Victim Statistics (RCVS), which are based on the Australian system. However, the recent introduction of RCVS makes it difficult to compare data from previous years. RCVS exclude those offences that police record for charging purposes. For example, in a murder case where only one victim was killed, two offenders could be charged with different offences: murder with a firearm and murder with a knife. The new RCVS system counts '1' for each broad offence type so that victims are counted only once, regardless of the number of offenders (NZ Police 2016). Under this new system, the most common victimisations were theft and related offences; unlawful entry with intent, burglary, and break and enter; and assault (Statistics New Zealand 2016). In the RCOS, however, traffic and related offences are the most common with theft and related offences counted as the third most common. Therefore, depending on what set of statistics are used, a different count of common crimes is arrived at. Gaining an accurate picture of the most common crimes is a complex undertaking. It could be argued, however, that separating out victims and offenders in this way can give a more accurate picture of crime and victimisation.

It is also important to note that the RCVS exclude 'victimless' crimes such as drug and public order offences (NZ Police 2016), while these offences are still included in the RCOS. Excluding these offences from the RCVS is said to make crime counts and crime trend analyses more reliable. This is because statistics on drug and public order offences were mostly affected by proactive policing operations, rather than representing an actual increase in reporting (NZ Police 2016). Therefore, trends in policing may determine any increase or decrease of certain crime types. Due to the numerous complexities and difficulties in counting common crimes, the picture painted by official statistics in terms of common offences is often partial and incomplete.

The Complexity of Crime and the Problem of Official 'Bias'

Although accessing official data about common crimes in both countries has never been easier, what remains is the often complex and difficult challenge of understanding what the data represent about individuals who commit crime and the communities in which these crimes occur. First, it must be acknowledged that there is no single or simple definition of crime. For some scholars, crime ought to be unproblematic, best defined as acts which constitute a direct contravention of existing criminal laws and codes. For others, crime is an elusive concept often used as a catch-all term to describe a broader continuum of acts, of which only some are legally defined as crimes. As Sampson and Laub (2003) note, the key challenge for criminology is not the counting of crime but rather in deciding what ought to be counted, when, and how best to interpret this data in the absence of any clear definition of crime and criminality. Labelling theorists such as Becker ([1963] 1973, 8–9) also note that crime and deviance were not fixed categories, and that these labels are socially constructed: 'Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction creates deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by other of rules and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label'. What counts as crime is, therefore, not as straightforward as it might first appear, and these scholarly contributions act as important and timely reminders that crime is, at the very least, socially undesirable behaviour for which there is no perfect method of quantification.

Those who commit crime—however defined—typically spend much of their time trying to avoid formal detection and official apprehension. At best, therefore, official records likely represent only a very small and skewed subset of all crimes that are actually committed (Sampson and Laub 2003). Alternative methods, such as self-report surveys of offenders, might appear to offer a promising alternative with a range of new insights, but even these methods are themselves plagued by significant limitations (see Payne and Piquero 2016). What is important, therefore, is to recognise that those crimes identified as 'common' in official statistics are biased in a number of ways.

Underreporting of Crime

Commonly recorded crimes in official data are heavily biased towards those crimes that are frequently reported to police. Only a small fraction of all crimes are happened upon by police during their general duties. Consequently, underreported crimes may never appear as common as they might actually be. Family, domestic, and sexual assault, for example, are notoriously underreported by their victims (Carbone-Lopez et al. 2016; Moore and Baker 2016); often out of fear of retribution by the perpetrator or because such matters are deemed too private, trivial, or unable to be acted upon by police (Ministry of Justice 2015). Crime that is reported to the police is often referred to as the ‘tip of the iceberg’, with the majority of crime unreported and hidden from view. This is commonly referred to as the *dark figure of crime* (Radzinowicz and King 1977).

Weighed against this apparent underreporting of sexual and other interpersonal crimes are the comparatively high rates of reporting for property crimes such as home burglary and motor vehicle theft. Unashamed of their status as a victim of property crime (Bowles et al. 2009) and often motivated by insurance companies’ requirement to file a police report for financial compensation (Myers 1980), victims of property crime are far more likely to report their experience to the police and have their experience as victims counted in official statistics. This is not to say that all victims of property crime report to police, only that these crimes are disproportionately reported. Hence, they might appear more common relative to other unreported crime types. For example, the 2013 NZCASS noted that 68% of crime was not reported to the police and 41% of incidents were not considered crimes by the victim (Ministry of Justice 2015). So, whatever the crime type, understanding of what is common and what is not is limited to that which is reported to police. Without doubt, most crimes, but in particular interpersonal crimes, are more common than indicated by official statistics.

Operational and Administrative Issues

Official data are collected from the administrative systems of police and other criminal justice agencies. These systems are designed to meet operational needs above all others, to facilitate and streamline police activity. Crime statistics extracted from these systems inherit some degree of operational bias. Here, the term ‘operational bias’ is used to describe the many ways in which officially recorded data reflect the operational imperatives and decisions of

their collection practitioners. This includes priorities and directives of Police Commissioners and on-the-spot decision-making by frontline officers about where to police, what to target, and whom to apprehend. At a very rudimentary level, crimes are typically recorded and counted with reference to the date on which each matter was reported or processed, not necessarily the date on which the actual crime occurred. In the vast majority of crimes, these dates are not the same, and for some crime types, such as sexual assault, the date of reporting and processing can be many years apart. At the more complex end, there are those policing strategies, such as 'hot spot' targeting, which also have the potential to influence what is counted as common, especially when comparing specific geographical locations and policing areas. Proactive efforts to target specific crime types or offenders will likely increase the apparent frequency of specific crimes or the apprehension of specific types of offenders, such as happened during the 'war on drugs' in the USA (Stevens 2008).

In Australia, the implications of these operational practices have been most consequential for the measurement of physical assault. At the time of writing, national victimisation statistics still exclude crime counts for common or aggravated assault. This is largely due to the significant operational differences which prevent compilation across different data sets and limit reliable inter-jurisdictional analysis. Specifically, in Victoria, a victim report is usually only recorded where an investigation has been conducted and where it has been determined that a crime was committed. Similarly, in Queensland, assaults are not recorded unless the victim consents to the matter being investigated, whereas in most other jurisdictions, victimisation records are created for every victim report, irrespective of the eventual outcome.

The important issue of Indigenous overrepresentation in the justice system sits as yet another reminder of the potential for operational bias to influence who and what gets counted in official crime statistics. In New Zealand, Māori make up approximately 15% of the general population, but over 50% of the prison population (Department of Corrections 2009). For particular offence categories, this overrepresentation is glaring with Māori being three times more likely to be arrested and convicted for cannabis use than non-Māori (Fergusson et al. 2003), as well as being more likely to be prosecuted and convicted of possession or use of an illicit drug or drug utensil. Racial and ethnic disparities are a common theme in the crime statistics of many countries (Eastwood et al. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2008). For the specific case of New Zealand, the UN has urged the government to address this human rights violation it regards as arbitrary detention (UN News Centre 2014). Māori are also more likely to be imprisoned than receive a community sentence and also receive longer prison sentences for similar offences

committed by non-Māori (Quince 2007). Most scholars agree that these apparent differences result, in part, from the way in which certain minority populations are policed (Cunneen and White 2007). This is a significant issue that should be noted when considering the processes involved in counting crime, particularly in settler-colonial jurisdictions such as New Zealand and Australia.

Counting Issues

Apart from recording biases that concern data input, data output biases can also affect our understanding of common crimes. Data output bias concerns the methods and techniques used by analysts to extract and make sense of data. Such techniques are often described as counting rules and represent a set of standardised parameters designed to maximise the degree of consistency between multiple data recording systems. In Australia, recorded crime data sets are collated individually from each of the eight states and territories and combined into a single system for analysis. This ‘bringing together’ of different data systems—each developed for distinct operational environments, and subject to different organisational practices—necessarily requires a process of standardisation, and the application of consistent counting rules. With a single police service in New Zealand, the complexities of amalgamating statistics from different jurisdictions are less apparent, and as a non-federal state, New Zealand does not face the same issues noted in the Australian context.

The consequences of this standardisation process are many and varied, often described in technical appendices and notes, and not easily digested by the lay reader. In Australia, each offender is counted only once per annual period, meaning that where a single offender is responsible for multiple crimes in any one year, only the principal crime is recorded, which is determined according to the severity scale of the Australian National Offence Index (NOI).² The most serious crime of each year is recorded even if such behaviour is infrequent in an offender’s overall offending pattern. Consequently, crimes committed by repeat offenders are significantly undercounted, while their seriousness is overstated. Further, crimes committed by co-offenders are counted once for each co-offender. Consequently, some incidents—such as a home burglary committed by three co-offenders—may be double or triple counted. This potentially leads to the overrepresentation of crime types where co-offending is typical.

For victimisation data, a different set of counting rules applies. Unlike offender data, victimisation data are counted for each unique crime category and for each instance of victimisation throughout the year. This means that each unique victimisation is recorded, even if the same individual is victimised multiple times, but it also means that a single crime may be double counted in situations where a single incident involves more than one offence category or more than one victim. For example, a victim of kidnapping who was later physically and sexually assaulted would be counted three times—one each for kidnapping, assault, and sexual assault—even though the three offences were essentially the product of the same criminal incident at the hands of the one individual.

Finally, what counts as an incident of victimisation will largely depend on how the matter is reported and subsequently recorded by police. This relates to the so-called *grey figure of crime*, that is, crime which is reported to the police but either not recorded or recorded inaccurately. Whether an incident is recorded as one crime or multiple crimes depends on the victim recalling and reporting each specific victimisation. For example, for victims to properly enumerate cases of sexual assault over many months or years would require them to recall and report each single event. More commonly, such series of victimisations are reported as a single overall experience and are thus often counted as one crime.

Further Debates

As previously noted, there is no single definition of crime, and there is no single appropriate method to quantify crime and crime types. At best, the systems used to identify the most common crimes can only approximate the real rate of crime and—despite best efforts of national statistical agencies—these data systems remain challenged by various biases that have significant consequences for interpretation and use. Consequently, what is presented as ‘common’ might not readily forewarn of the most pressing concerns, but instead reflect issues of current—and perhaps misplaced—interest. Prioritisations in policy and policing activities have the potential to skew crime counts in favour of those crime types for which there is some pre-existing concern. The targeting of specific offence types potentially increases their apparent prevalence. This justifies not only the initial targeting but also warrants future targeting and expenditure to combat what is now characterised as an emerging problem. Hence, common crimes are not only those that are the most numerous, but

also reflect those that have attracted some operational prioritisation. Common crimes not only demand increased attention from government and police, but they are also officially noted as crimes as a result of any increased resourcing and attention that is given to ‘common’ offending behaviours.

Of course, not all new policing priorities result in more frequent crime recording and, perhaps, the single largest contemporary concern for national crime data compilation is the rigidity and insensitivity of data input systems to emerge areas of criminological interest. In particular, there is reason to believe that earlier efforts to standardise both the input and output of recorded crime data have rendered those same systems inflexible to more nuanced context-specific characteristics of crime for which additional and detailed reporting is sorely needed. As has been the case in Australia recently, the quantification of family and domestic violence as a specific subset of other interpersonal violence demonstrates this problem. Physical assault, for example, is singularly recorded as either ‘common’ or ‘aggravated’ irrespective of the circumstances. Domestic violence assaults—a crime type considered by many to be both common and warranting independent quantification—are therefore unable to be meaningfully identified as a distinct subset, despite a growing public concern about the scourge of domestic violence, and despite significant financial and political investment in prevention programmes.

Crimes not Reported

Perhaps the most significant criticism of the statistical collecting of crime concerns the undercounting of crimes that are committed but never come to the attention of recording authorities. The rate of underreporting is higher for some crime types than others, in particular, personal crimes such as assault and sexual assault. For this reason, both Australia and New Zealand have continued to invest in victimisation surveys in an effort to shed some light on these hidden experiences.

In Australia, the Crime Victimisation Survey was last conducted in 2014–2015 by the ABS, implemented as an addendum to the telephone-administered Multi-Purpose Household Survey (ABS 2016). The limited capacity of the survey restricted its breadth to three personal crimes (assault, sexual assault, and robbery) and five household crimes (break and enter, motor vehicle theft, theft from a motor vehicle, other theft, and malicious property damage). Data are reported as estimates of population prevalence; for example, the proportion of the population that has experienced motor vehicle theft in the last 12 months. Nationally, the crime type

with the highest victimisation rate was assault with an estimated 840,500 victims, which is 4.5% of the population. Of these, 2.9% experienced threatened assault and 2.1% suffered physical assault. Of household crimes, malicious property damage was the most common, with 511,400 households or 5.7% of all households experiencing victimisation, followed by 'other' theft, theft from a motor vehicle, and burglary. Due to the different counting units of persons and households, a direct comparison of crime types is impractical. However, there are more individuals who experience assault (both physical and threatened) than are recorded in official statistics, and there are considerably more assault victims than there are households that experience any single form of property crime.

Attempting to access the dark figure of crime, New Zealand has undertaken the NZCASS in 2006, 2009, and 2014. The survey is conducted face-to-face with a sample of 7000 randomly selected residents. A diverse range of crime types is explored, including six household and nine personal crime types. Of the personal crimes, physical assault was recorded as having both the highest prevalence and the highest incidence with 196,000 victims and 512,000 incidents; followed by threats of violence or force with 175,000 victims and 401,000 incidents; and sexual offences with 74,000 victims and 186,000 incidents. Of the household crimes, the most common was burglary with 136,000 households and 203,000 incidents; followed by household damage with 78,000 households and 119,000 incidents; and vehicular damage with 58,000 households and 74,000 incidents. Hence, the NZCASS reports the *opposite* of the official police statistics, meaning that crimes of violence—particularly sexual violence—are the most common. Police statistics report theft and property offences as the most common. In the 2014 NZCASS, 68% of crime was not reported to the police. Victims reported that they did not report crimes because they felt the crime was 'too trivial' (49%), it was a 'private' matter (24%), or that the police could not have done anything in response (22%) (Ministry of Justice 2015). This illustrates the problems in counting common crimes and trying to estimate with any degree of accuracy the amount of crime in any given country. What constitutes 'common crimes' depends very much on who is asked and in what context.

Notwithstanding, the differences in methodology and measurement, both the Australian and New Zealand victimisation surveys are generally consistent in their identification of both physical and threatened assault as the most common of all personal crimes, while property damage emerges as the most common of the property crimes experienced by households. That said, both surveys also offer an important and unique insight into why this data differ from that collected from administrative sources. In particular, crime

victimisation surveys offer a rare glimpse into the dark figure of crime by estimating the prevalence of underreporting of different offence types. In both Australia and New Zealand, only a small fraction of victims report their most recent crime experience to the police. In New Zealand, for example, only 38% of household crimes and 24% of personal crimes are reported to the police. The crime types least likely to be reported to police in both countries were personal crimes such as assault and sexual assault. NZCASS noted that a large majority of respondents did not experience any crime (76% in 2013, and 63% in 2008), but also noted that particular groups such as young people and Māori are more likely to be the victims of crime, as are those who are unemployed and those who live in state housing. Moreover, the NZCASS demonstrates that the large majority of people do not worry about crime, but that particular groups such as women and ethnic groups fear crime the most; 43% of Asian people, 41% of Pacific peoples, and 17% of Māori worry about being harassed, intimidated, or assaulted because of their ethnicity/indigeneity (Ministry of Justice 2015). This leads us to consider the consequences of the recognised over-policing of Indigenous and ethnic groups, and the under-policing of the same groups as victims of crime (Cunneen and White 2007). Note also that a small number of people experience most of the crime. Some 3% of people experience 53% of all crime (Ministry of Justice 2015), demonstrating that victimisation is uneven and often concentrated amongst the most vulnerable, disadvantaged populations.

Conclusion

Crime statistics are an important tool for monitoring the nature and type of offending that occurs. They make possible the ranking of different offence types by frequency, allowing the most common crimes to be identified and responded to by policy makers and law enforcement practitioners. Yet, for the many reasons highlighted throughout this chapter, an overreliance on officially recorded statistics could have unintended consequences, focussing attention on crimes that appear common only because their victims are more likely to report, or because they are crimes that are administratively or operationally more likely to be identified. The clear conclusion is that public discourse about crime, and thus the decisions made by governments, must be informed by multiple data sources, using a triangulation of mixed methods data collection, for what is common in officially recorded crime statistics will potentially mask some more important social problems.

Notes

1. It is important to note here that due to a range of data comparability issues, the ABS does not yet report victimisation rates for common assault.
2. Knowledge of the NOI and its compilation is important for interpretation, as it relates to the counting preferences attributed to specific offence types. The offence of drug dealing or trafficking of non-commercial quantities, a charge often imposed for the possession of quantities greater than for personal use, is ranked 21 of 157 on the NOI—higher than aggravated robbery (NOI 24), common assault (NOI 28), and the trafficking of regulated weapons or explosives (NOI 47).

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Author Biographies

Jason L. Payne is a Senior Lecturer in criminology at the ANU. His research focusses on drugs and crime, developmental criminology, and quantitative evaluation methods. In his former role as research manager of the AIC's Violent and Serious Crime Monitoring programme, he was responsible for a wide range of research programmes such as the DUMA programme.

Fiona Hutton is a Senior Lecturer in criminology at the Institute of Criminology, VUW. Her research focusses on young people, gender, social networking sites and alcohol, alcohol and drug use, and harm reduction. She is author of *Risky Pleasures? Club Cultures and Feminine Identities*, and is currently critically exploring NZ's drug policy, with a focus on legal highs.