

Statistical guidance on crime and policing statistics

For communication and media teams working for Police
and Crime Commissioners

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Foreword

Professor Stephen Shute

Chair of the Crime Statistics Advisory Committee

Appropriate use of crime and policing statistics is essential if public trust and confidence in those statistics and in the police service is to be maintained. As the Chair of the Crime Statistics Advisory Committee (CSAC), I welcome the publication of this guidance which aims to provide assistance to you on best practice of using crime and policing statistics in accordance with the principles outlined by the UK Statistics Authority. I also strongly support the commitment to ensure that crime statistics are accurate, clearly presented, comprehensive, transparent, and trustworthy, and endorse the work that is already underway on improving public trust in statistics. You can play an important role in ensuring that the good work continues and I hope you will find this guidance a useful and practical tool.

The guidance is divided into three main parts: an overview of the importance of statistics, advice for using data publicly and the main crime and policing outputs available; more detailed technical descriptions; and recommendations on management of data and guidelines for presenting data.

This guidance was developed with the support of the Committee and I would like to thank colleagues in the Home Office for leading on the production and development of this guidance. I am also grateful to colleagues in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and the College of Policing for their contributions.

Introduction

Purpose of this guidance: Making statistics work for you

This document is designed to provide guidance on best practice for using crime and policing statistics to improve understanding and interpretation of the data and to help build and maintain public trust in official information. The guidance presents recommended best practice in accordance with the UK Statistics Authority framework¹ and its Code of Practice². Statistics on crime and policing are available from different sources; are produced in a number of different outputs; and have differing strengths and limitations so being able to ‘unlock’ and accurately interpret the data is vital. These statistics can help in holding your Chief Constable to account when:

- reviewing force performance management and setting priorities;
- communicating with the public and informing public debate;
- developing evidence based decisions.

The guidance brings together information on the collection, presentation and management of data as well as the sources of statistics available into a comprehensive toolkit for you. This is the third document available in this set and gives a summary on presenting data for communication teams. The first part of the series offers advice to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) on using data publicly and presents the crime and policing outputs available. The second part contains more detail on the sources of crime and policing statistics and technical descriptions for analysts working for PCCs.

Benefits of statistics

Statistical analysis can make an important contribution to the delivery of an effective and efficient police service and to how police and their partners tackle crime. It can be used to identify the nature of a crime problem, understand the most cost-effective ways of addressing the problem, and monitor and evaluate any initiatives implemented to address the problem. An analysis of the nature of a crime problem is usually a critical first step to ensure that community needs are being met, and there are wide ranges of statistics that can be used to help with this.

To monitor and assess force performance and to demonstrate to the public how forces are performing you will likely be using, interpreting and reporting on statistics generated nationally and locally. However, not all statistical evidence is robust and evidence of effectiveness in one context may not translate easily to another. There is growing interest in making greater use of statistics and data analysis within policing and making good use of them can be hugely beneficial.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/index.html>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

Using data publicly

Statistics are tools that can turn data into useful information that can then be used to raise awareness, influence behaviour and voters, and help to drive local accountability and transparency. Good and accurate use of statistics can help to establish credibility, increase influence and contribute over time to enhanced reputation. Poor use of statistics can lead to loss of trust and reduced authority. You, therefore, have a critical role in presenting data clearly to ensure that your communities and partners understand the data you make available to them.

The way statistical data are summarised or presented can lead to wrong conclusions being drawn even if the statistics are correct. It is important, therefore, to ensure that they are quoted accurately using reliable (published) sources that are properly referenced and caveated where necessary.

Statistics are a hugely important and influential resource, but if they are not understood then they are not doing as much good as they could, and run the risk of being misinterpreted.

Six guidelines with examples

The following are some general tips to ensure the best presentation.

1. *Show the full picture*

When writing about statistics do not just pick out the successes, show a balance of results. Do not just say there was a change (e.g. a fall in crime), always also say either what it fell from or what it fell to.

2. *Don't claim too much*

Be cautious about saying that you can “prove” or “show” that policies have worked using statistics. It is often better to say that they “indicate” or “suggest”. For example:

“There was a 27 per cent fall in knife homicides in areas piloting my knife crime initiatives, from 199 in 2011/12 to 145 in 2012/13, compared with a 13 per cent increase in areas where these initiatives have not yet been implemented (55 to 62, respectively). These data suggest that my initiatives may be contributing to a fall in knife-related deaths.”

3. *Compare similar data*

It is usually best to compare changes year-on-year using identical time periods. For example:

“Crime in September to December 2012 is down 40 per cent compared with the same period the year before.”

This ensures seasonal factors are not mis-interpreted. It should be noted that it is not always appropriate to compare forces as they vary in terms of population and geographical size and composition.

4. *Be clear where the statistics are from*
 State the data source(s) that the statistics come from. For example:
“There was a fall of x% in police recorded crime...” or “According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales...”
 If applicable, include web links and table or chapter references to allow readers to see the underlying data for themselves.

5. *When numbers are small (e.g. less than 100) beware of percentages*
 Small numbers are better quoted directly. For example:
“There were 11 homicides recorded by Bassetshire Police in 2011/12, down from 19 the previous year.”
 If you must use percentages always include the actual numbers so that readers don't over-interpret accuracy. For example:
“Homicides in Bassetshire were down 42 per cent (from 19 in 2010/11 to 11 in 2011/12)”.
 For small numbers, also consider using simple proportions. For example:
“Attempted murders recorded by Bassetshire Police were down by a fifth” – rather than “fell 20 per cent”. But still quote exact numbers.

6. *Be clear about limitations or quality issues affecting the data*
 Explain how big the survey or study sample sizes were, response rates, whether the results were nationally representative, whether there were changes to the way data were collected / recorded and (if appropriate) whether results are statistically significant. If these details are too technical, consider using footnotes or notes to editors.

Examples of good and bad use of stats

Example 1

Good: *“Police recorded crime fell by 5 per cent in the year to September 2012 compared with a year earlier.”*

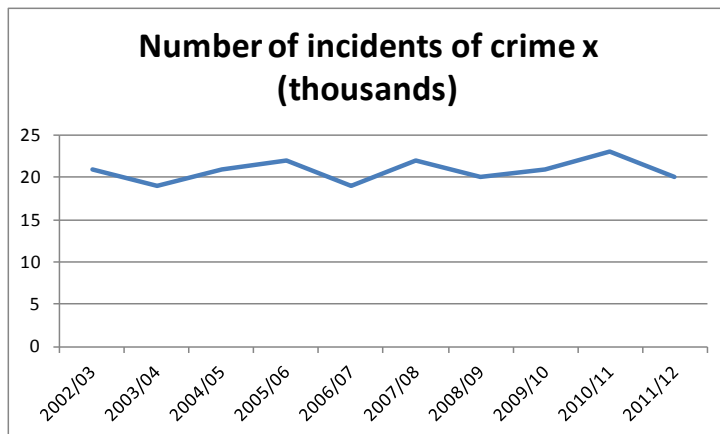
Bad: *“Crime is down by 5 per cent.”* – What is the source? Down 5 per cent compared to when?

Example 2

Good: *“There was one homicide recorded by Bassetshire Police in 2011/12, compared with two recorded the previous year.”*(Percentage changes are not appropriate when presenting small numbers).

Bad: *“There was a 50 per cent fall in homicides between 2010/11 and 2011/12.”*

Example 3



Good: “According to the 2011/12 Crime Survey for England and Wales , crime x fell by 13 per cent in the last year, however the trend has been relatively flat since 2002/03.”

– i.e. don’t just focus on the most recent quarter/year, put it into context.

Bad: “Crime x fell by 13 per cent in the year to 2011/12”

Ensuring the integrity of data

The guidance contained within this document has been compiled to assist in the appropriate use of crime and policing statistics; to make crime statistics comprehensible and accessible and for the public to have increased trust and confidence in them.

It includes recommended best practices for *official* statistics, in accordance with the [UK Statistics Authority](#) framework, but we would encourage that these be viewed as a benchmark when producing and publishing any set of statistical information. If you intend to publish any data you should ensure that you have the right/appropriate permission to publish it and it would be advisable to follow the [Code of Practice](#) for official statistics where appropriate.

It is also advisable to provide contact details to which the users can direct any comments/questions regarding the release.

Consequences of misusing statistics publicly could lead to damaged reputation of the recipient organisation as well as undermining public trust in statistics.

Who to contact for further guidance

The following may be contacted for guidance or support with statistical queries:

crimestats@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

crimestatistics@ons.gsi.gov.uk