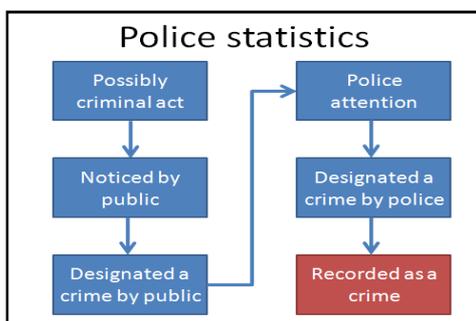


Measuring crime

You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify limitations of measurements of behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different ways of measuring crime.



Police statistics

One way of measuring crime is to use the records compiled by the police of the crimes that come to their attention and are recorded as such. However, a number of things must happen before a crime is recorded.

How might the process of a crime coming to police attention result in a misleading picture of how much crime there is?

Court and prison statistics

Alternately, the crime rate can be estimated by looking at the numbers of people convicted of criminal offences and the type of offences they are convicted of. Alternately, we could look at the number of people in prison and the types of offences they have committed.

How might each of these measures misrepresent the true extent of crime?

General population surveys

The British Crime Survey is an annual survey of about 50,000 adults (16+) in England and Wales. Respondents answer questions on whether they have been a victim of crime and give details of up to five crimes where they have been the victim. They also answer questions about their perception of crime (e.g. how worried they are; whether they think crime is going up or down) and their opinions about the police and criminal justice systems.

In which ways might the BCS produce data that are a more or a less valid measure of crime than the data from police records of crime?

In an offending survey, a representative sample of people is taken from a population and asked about crimes they have committed e.g. within the past 12 months. This is used to make estimates about the number of offenders and the extent of crime in the population. Offender survey data often differ markedly from official statistics. For example, Wilson (1980) found that whilst 20% of a sample of 10-17 year old boys from a deprived area had a criminal conviction, usually for theft or burglary, 40% reported having shoplifted and 67% reported having engaged in minor vandalism (graffiti).

Why might offender surveys underestimate the extent of more serious crime?

Choice of statistics

Scientists try to make the most truthful interpretation of the available statistics, but people may select statistics that support a particular view they wish to promote. Read the summary of crime statistics for England and Wales (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1109summ.pdf>) and suggest which measures might be chosen by (1) a member of the government; (2) a member of the opposition and (3) a chief police officer arguing for more resources.