Crime Stats and the Hidden Unknown: *Overreporting*

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There is often a hidden unknown, lurking in the background of many police department's crime statistics that lives on in infamy once outed from the shadows, usually at the most inopportune and unexpected times. Its anonymity is sometimes replaced with headlines in the news, revealing its ugliness for the whole community to see, bringing with it casts of doubt about the department's integrity. Allegations of cooking the books swirl about, placing the department on defense, struggling to explain what happened.

The term "cooking the books" suggests an intentional effort to artificially lower the crime rate in a city by altering crime data to make it look safer than it really is. Crime stats are a major topic of interest when it comes to real estate development, business development, and home values. When the rate of crime is high, growth in these areas is low. There are very real and serious consequences of high crime rates; their tentacles reach all corners of economic stability and growth.

So imagine how upset one might be only to discover that real crime was quite different than what the data shows? That it was actually…much lower, not higher than reported.

The economic fallout of developers and businesses deciding not to invest millions in a city because of crime equates to higher taxes and unemployment, lower wages, and community degradation.

In 2010, the Phoenix Police Department was accused in a very high-profile manner of cooking the books but not in the traditional sense such egregiousness suggests. Local newspapers and TV stations published a series of investigative stories alleging the department had falsely *increased* kidnapping statistics to obtain federal grant funding for combating the problem.

Indeed, the city was dubbed the "kidnapping capital of the world" by then Senator John McCain. It had gained international notoriety for kidnapping, murder, and drugs. People were afraid. Business suffered. Politicians were in an uproar. The Chief's job was on the line.

The numbers were wrong.

Records personnel and the Crime Analyst took the brunt of it all. "What is going on?", people asked. "Are the numbers right? Have you checked the 'data reports'?".

For over six months, an internal circus of auditing was conducted to try and get to the bottom of these allegations. The department unfortunately looked in all the wrong places; everywhere except the one place that would verify if a kidnapping was a kidnapping. The police reports themselves.

A 2011 audit report revealed the following:[1]

> "Although there are a number of competing explanations for the PPD's assertion that the statistics were accurate, the Panel concludes that one cause involves a lack of communication between the analysts in CARU [the Crime Analysis unit] and the Department leadership. CARU, in response to various requests, produced the list of 358 cases by running a data report based on the statutory citation for kidnapping, along with a few other criteria. In effect, all cases that had the kidnapping statutory citation were pulled for this data report.
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> As questions arose about the 358 reports, the Department and city leadership continually checked with CARU, asking if staff had "checked the reports." According to testimony from Assistant Chief Andy Anderson, this was where the breakdown occurred. Leadership believed it had asked if CARU had pulled the "investigative" departmental reports containing the facts of the case filed by detectives. CARU assumed that PPD leadership asked if the "data" reports had been checked; because it was not within its responsibility, however, staff from CARU never examined an actual police departmental report to assess its validity as a kidnapping.

There it was, buried deep in the audit report. Staff never examined an actual police report, the only place that would confirm if in fact a case involved an actual kidnapping. Did the crime actually happen or was it disproven? Did it happen in Phoenix? Should it be counted?

Asking the question why the department neglected to review actual cases is certainly a reasonable one. The answer was found in the cultural underpinnings of the agency, one which unfortunately exists all too often in the profession when it comes to crime reporting and records management.

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[1] City of Phoenix Kidnapping Statistics Review Panel Report. May 19, 2011

The audit report described the presence of an "ambivalent nature of the Department's attitude toward reporting and case management". It was "the foundation of the problem of inaccurate crime statistics". In fact, kidnappings were *misreported* at a rate of 38%.

> *The PSB audit determined that 136 reports - or 38% - did not meet its kidnapping audit criteria. These reports did not meet the audit criteria for a host of reasons, although the largest category was comprised of reports that found "no crime articulated".*
>
> *Why these 136 cases were incorrectly classified can, in part, be traced to the complexity of these crimes, the commission of multiple crimes in a single incident at varying levels of seriousness, and the use of Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) section 13-1304 (2008) for classifying kidnapping cases, in the absence of a federal Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) definition. The Panel, however, believes that the kidnapping statistical errors resulted largely from problems with reporting and case management.[2]*

At the conclusion of what, for Phoenix, was quite a major ordeal and sustained black eye on the department, the Chief of Police was forced out. Personnel were investigated. Integrity was called into question and trust in a major metropolitan police department was forever harmed.

After the dust settled and two separate audits were conducted, it was eventually determined the inaccuracies were not intentional. It came down to inadequate controls and training in the world of case management.

The statistics provided in response to media requests were based on raw data. More importantly, unfounded cases were not unfounded in the records management system. There were gaps in the workflows and procedures for managing the proper status and disposition of criminal investigations.

What is case management? It is best defined as:

> ***"The combined business processes required to ensure the timely and correct management of the status and disposition of criminal investigations as they progress through the criminal justice system."***

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[2] Ibid.

There are two types of crime data to measure in law enforcement including 1) raw data and 2) NIBRS data. Raw data represents true counts of crime. It is not based on the reporting standards of UCR/NIBRS such as the time and place rule, lesser included offenses, or mutually exclusive offenses. Every criminal act is counted in raw data.

Accordingly, NIBRS data will produce different numbers of crimes than raw data and thus, these two measurements are not supposed to match. Yet, they are equally important.

When producing crime data for both internal consumption and external entities, there is often a lack of clarity and consistency in what is being provided. Raw data or UCR data?

It is imperative to articulate what the data represents and how it was produced. This however is not possible when the department itself lacks a thorough understanding of the complexities of crime stats and the many elements and technicalities involved in their production. Consider the following headlines:

www.trentonian.com › news › trenton-police-report-horre...

Trenton Police report horrendously inaccurate crime stats to ...

Apr 30, 2020 — Officials didn't include a **rate** for violent **crime**. An analysis by The Trentonian, based off **Trenton Police's** reported **crime stats**, showed it wasn't ...

Albuquerque Journal

Flaws discovered in APD's crime statistics

In response to questions from the Journal, the Albuquerque Police ... new set of mid-year statistics last week, saying it had found inaccuracies in what ... The city has not held a news conference on crime statistics for the third ...
Dec 1, 2019

www.latimes.com › local › lanow › la-me-ln-lapd-crime-s...

Inaccurate LAPD crime statistics prompt larger investigation ...

Alex Bustamante, inspector general for the **Police** Commission, said he will examine **crime data** recorded by ...

Why the US needs better crime reporting statistics

Oct 12, 2018 — The way **crimes** are currently counted in the US can easily confuse and mislead. ... **data** is provided directly to the state by both the county **police** departments and the smaller municipalities. ... This metric can be **misleading**.

Hundreds of assault cases misreported by Milwaukee Police Department

City's violent crime rate lowered based on faulty data

A Journal Sentinel Watchdog Update

Flynn: Department misreported more than 5,300 violent assaults

A Journal Sentinel Watchdog Update

Police misreporting trend extends to assaults on officers

By Ben Poston of the Journal Sentinel

A Journal Sentinel Watchdog Update

Flawed Milwaukee crime numbers festered for years

Police department insiders tell of failure to act, pressure to underreport findings

Adding to the complexity is the fact that some criminal acts, as defined by state law, are defined differently under NIBRS and thus are often misclassified. Assaults can be either aggravated or simple in NIBRS, depending on the circumstances surrounding how they are committed. Theft is an element (lesser included offense) of burglary when property is taken during a burglary. An armed robbery is inclusive of assault with a firearm.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Develop consistent, policy-driven methods for querying systems and producing crime data.

- ✓ Provide clear, transparent explanations of what the department's crime statistics represent (raw data vs. UCR data).

- ✓ Case management, crime reporting and UCR/NIBRS training is essential.

- ✓ Assess, identify and correct current case management workflows and procedural gaps.

How To Get Help

PRI is a consulting and training firm specializing in law enforcement information management compliance, systems and operations. We provide effective and collaborative solutions to ensure the proper management and production of accurate records and data through:

- o Operational assessments and business process reengineering
- o Audits
- o Training programs
- o Technology needs assessments and procurement services
- o Systems integration and project management
- o Customized software development

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