

Crime on the high street goes missing

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For almost two decades now the statistics for recorded crime in England and Wales have been falling. And even though there has always been a difference, of some magnitude, between the numbers gathered through the British Crime Survey – a large-scale sample of the public's experiences of crime victimisation – and the (persistently smaller) statistics compiled by the police, there has been broad agreement at least in the downward trend.



No doubt this has given much cause for encouragement within government, particularly in these recent years of economic recession when most criminologists had been predicting a reversal in the trend – at least for acquisitive crime. The official statistics suggest this has simply not happened. But, it must be asked: have we been seeing the whole picture?

Probably not, would be one conclusion to be drawn from a recent report from the British Retail Consortium (BRC) – a report that draws attention to the considerable scale and growth of crime on our high streets. The statistics (annually collected by BRC) were based on surveys of just 30 retail organisations, but they were among the largest such enterprises, together accounting for just over half of national retail turnover. They show 2012–13 to have experienced among the highest levels of shop-theft for nine years, with a total of more than 631,000 such incidents recorded, and at a cost to the retail industry of around £511 million last year.

But then come the most surprising revelations – that just nine per cent of these crime incidents were reported to the police, and that the reporting rate here was 12 per cent lower than in the preceding year, 2011–12. Here then, appears to be a very different perspective on crime in Britain in a recessionary period. Certainly the low reporting rate to the police indicates that the official crime statistics miss a significant proportion of acquisitive crime, and the suggestion in the report is that the main reason lies in diminishing confidence in the police to respond.

This latter point, of course, is hardly new – the British Crime Survey has consistently found high levels of non-reporting of petty crime to be due to lack of public confidence in the police to respond, still less to be able to apprehend the offender and recover any lost property. For most people, we are told, the main value in reporting property crime to the police is to obtain a crime number to assist with an insurance claim.

But what of the situation on the high street? As well as arguing for improvements in the reporting and recording of shop-thefts and other retail crime, and for better law enforcement (from reporting through to prosecution), the BRC report presses the case for a more concerted focus on business crime by local police forces. In this respect it is interesting to note from our research here at the University of Birmingham that an analysis of the Police and Crime Plans – the statutory strategy documents produced last year by each Police and Crime Commissioner, and which establish the priorities for policing locally over a five-year period – revealed that, while almost all included generalised commitments towards the reduction and prevention of crime, specific reference to high street crime, or to initiatives to address the problems identified in the BRC report, were few and far between. Similarly, it was notable that, while around one in three of the Plans established the improvement of public confidence in policing as a priority to be addressed, very few references were to be found to the extremely low level of confidence in police responsiveness among retailers. In light of this report, perhaps some further reflection is called for, both on our perspectives about crime trends and on the priorities for policing.

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