Accurate figures matter.
Fear of crime and actual crime in Ireland should not be conflated says Siddhartha Bandyopadhyay.

Crime in Ireland has been rising according to the latest official figures. This is mirrored in the UK and in both countries goes against the steady downward decline seen over the last few years. Indeed, in most Western countries, crime rates have fallen over the recent years. Surprisingly, crime rates continued to fall during the recession.

Both the previous falling figures and the rise this year hide a lot of complexities. A year of rising crime rates, while worrying, probably does not warrant the recent dramatic headlines seen in some media outlets. For example, a recent headline in a leading UK daily says 'Lawless Britain: More than half of Britons fear Police have lost control, poll says' and seems to give the impression that UK citizens live in a

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dangerous country, filled with criminals who are fearlessly terrorising people with the police helpless to control them. While there are no doubt dangerous areas in the UK and Ireland, the fact is that there have been no dramatic changes in public safety over the years. Nor should we conclude that ‘the era of falling crime is over,’ as one leading Irish daily headline claimed.

We need to look at both trends and the composition of crime. In some ways Ireland is more complex to analyse because of flaws in crime recording. While official police statistics have been criticised in a number of countries, (including Britain), the Central Statistics Office in Ireland took the unusual step of withholding publication of data, citing irregularities, and has now published them again ‘under reservation’, suggesting that the statistics do not meet the standard required of official statistics published by CSO. That remains a flaw, as it masks actual trends in crime, leads to deficit of trust and allows for sensationalising crime, while impeding well-informed debates on this.

There are also challenges in the way law enforcement has to allocate its resources, which may contribute to public perceptions on how their complaints are responded to. In its admirable attempt to tackle exploitation and prevent terrorism, the police forces may well be stretched for resource. With a tight budget, we can expect police forces to have less time to tackle the pettier, but more visible, crimes the way the public would like it to. This has a clear impact on public satisfaction with the police and contributes to fear of crime. In view of these challenges, public satisfaction with the police has been fairly steady. Notwithstanding a slight blip this year, satisfaction with the gardaí remains high with roughly two in three victims being satisfied with how their case was handled. Overall trust for the Force among the public is even higher, reaching close to 90%. These are encouraging figures and suggest that the public is likely to back reforms that will enable the police to do its job better; including resources to modernise the Force.

Crime and its impact on society is enormous. There are costs incurred not only in the criminal justice system, but also on healthcare. The impact on victims and their families is also significant, with implications for their physical and psychological wellbeing. Thus, it is imperative that crime recording is improved.

The media has an important role to play in informing citizens and highlighting failures in policing, but news should be based on facts. Given that the incentives for sensationalising news are not likely to go away, improved and transparent data collection can play a role in focusing attention on where the serious challenges are in crime and disorder in the 21st century.

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