

THE VALIDITY OF OFFICIAL CRIME STATISTICS IN NDANGA COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to investigate the extent to which official crime statistics reflect the actual crimes committed. A survey was conducted in Ndanga community, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. From an estimated population of 600 people, 70 (11.67%) of which 30 were men and 40 were women were selected by convenience stratified sampling technique. Four (66.67%) of the police officers at the local sub-station were purposively selected to take part in the study. Interviews and focus group discussion were employed as data gathering instruments. The study found out a gap between the official crime statistics and the actual crimes committed in the studied area. What was found on the displayed police records was just a tip of the iceberg. A plethora of crimes were not recorded. These limitations of the official crime statistics were accounted for by factors like intimidation, corruption, ignorance, fear of police quizzing, poor road infrastructure, parallel judiciary system and police discretion. Arising from these findings were recommendations that all the police and the citizens should report all the crimes even if there are signs of intimidation. The local authority was recommended to improve the infrastructure of the area to facilitate more police patrols. Alternative ways of recording crimes like victim survey were also recommended since the official records were found to have some limitations.

KEY WORDS: crime; statistics; poverty; police; victims; challenges

The political and economic crisis since the late 1990 plunged Zimbabwe into rising poverty and social decline (Robertson, 2011). Social services delivery was compromised since most government workers were demotivated due to poor remuneration and other appalling working conditions. Poverty further gave birth to rise in unemployment and crime rates. In the rural areas, the rising poverty resulted in deterioration of infrastructure (Nzingo, 2010). This further militated against affective policing and crime control in rural parts of Zimbabwe.

It is a general belief that crimes committed within a particular area in a given period of time are captured in official crime statistics. Crime statistics is a useful component in assessing the problem and trends of crime. For instance, it can be used to assess whether crime is on the increase or decrease.

Given the appalling working conditions in which the law enforcement agents in Zimbabwe face versus the secretive nature of crime, the researchers were triggered to study whether the official crime statistics reflect the actual crimes committed. Generally previous researches on crime statistics were carried out on national scale but this specifically focuses on a remote setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Guided by various theories, criminologists and sociologists generally consider official crime statistics as being prone to some limitations (Haralambos and Holborn, 2010). This study was guided by the theory known as 'The Tip of the Iceberg'. The tip of the iceberg (Schaefer, 2010), refers to a small part or aspect of something largely hidden. Usually only 10% of the iceberg is seen above seawater. The shape of the remainder under the water can be difficult to estimate by looking at what is visible above the surface. This led to the expression 'tip of the iceberg' generally applied to the problem of difficulty meaning that visible trouble is only a small manifestation of the larger problem.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are high crime rates in Ndanga Community. Given the secretive nature of crime and the appalling working conditions for law enforcement agents in rural Zimbabwe, measurements of crime are likely to be inaccurate.

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Are all crimes committed in Ndanga Community reported and recorded by the police?

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

- What are the challenges faced by the police in recording crimes committed?
- What are the challenges faced by the victims in reporting crimes?

DELIMITATIONS

This study was carried out in Ndanga Community, Zaka District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. It was confined to the limitations associated with official crime statistics in representing actual crimes committed in the stated area.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a survey design to gather data from the participants. It entails a study of limited number of cases with a view of drawing up conclusion that covers the generality of the whole group under review (Chiromo, 2006). Interviews and focus group discussions were employed as data gathering instruments.

POPULATION

Ndanga community is made up of three small villages and had an estimated population of 600 people by March 2011. There were six police officers at the local substation.

SAMPLE

The researchers purposively selected four (66.67%) police officers based at Ndanga sub-station to participate in this study. Convenience stratified sampling technique was also used to identify 40 women and 30 men to respond to interview questions and participate in focus group discussions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers guaranteed the respondents that their responses were only to be used for the purpose of research. They were also assured that the study was in no way related to investigations of crimes and any link with the police.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were assembled and summaries were made using the interpretational analysis technique. Interpretational analysis is the process of examining data closely in order to find constructs themes and explain phenomenon (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996;562).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study appear in two categories in which answers to research questions are provided. The categories, comprise the challenges faced by the police in their policing duties and the challenges faced by the victims in reporting crimes to the police.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE VICTIMS IN REPORTING CRIMES TO THE POLICE

Fifty six (80%) of the respondents indicated that victims have a mammoth task of reporting crimes to the police due to intimidation by those who commit the crime. Cases which were said not to be recorded due to intimidation of both the victims and witnesses included rape, domestic violence and

political violence. Indications were that many victims were threatened by death, assault, divorce, dismissal from the village, arson and unspecified actions. This implies that more crimes in these categories were committed than those included in the official crime statistics.

Since the study was conducted in the communal lands, 51 (72.9%) of the respondents pointed out that the local leadership had their own way of settling disputes. Such disputes included some serious crimes like assault, theft, arson and domestic violence. These cases were dealt with by the family, village heads and chiefs hence not all of them were brought to the police. This implies that the parallel judiciary system in the remote communal lands resulted in decimation of reported crimes. To make matters worse those cases brought to the traditional leadership were also not recorded to be reconciled with the official statistics. Information obtained from this source was mainly based on memory and could be easily distorted.

Besides the point that the remote areas are associated with the parallel judiciary system, 46 (65.7%) indicated that these areas are also associated with poor infrastructure like appalling road and telephone network. In the heart of the countryside, crimes were committed but the victims found it difficult to report some cases due to poor transport and phone network. They chose not to travel 30 to 40 Kilometers on foot to the police station to report the crime. Such crimes ended up being reported to the traditional leaders and would not make their way into the official records.

When intimidated, victims would face challenges to report crimes to the police. Thirty eight (54.3%) also added that even without actual intimidation, victims also did not report cases because of fear of reprisals or victimization. Such cases, as pointed out by respondents included political violence or crimes committed by high profile personnel like the village head, family leaders, chiefs or business persons. Such fear resulted in gap between the actual and official crimes committed in the area of study.

Thirty five (50%) of the respondents pointed out that some cases were not reported to the police because the victims found the matter embarrassing. The cases included in this category were rape, assault and domestic violence in which the husband is a victim. The victims, indicated the respondents, would just keep quiet and these crimes would not make it into the official records.

For the crime to be reported, somebody must be aware that crime has taken place. Eighty three (75.7%) of the respondents averred that in some cases, the victims are not aware that a crime has been committed. Such cases were pointed out as fraud, confidence tricks, statutory rape and many cases in which children are victims. In fraud and confidence tricks, respondents indicated that it takes long for the victims to realize that a crime has been committed and such cases would go unreported. In cases involving children, respondents indicated that it is rare for them to conclude that a crime has been committed because they may not know the law or how to report to the police. In such cases, children may be assaulted, sexually harassed or raped (with consent but below age of consent). This factor also accounted for the limitation of official crime statistics.

The victims and witnesses do not only fear victimization and reprisals. Forty nine (70%) of the respondents also stated that victims and state witnesses do not report cases to the police because they fear rigorous quizzing by the police. As such they distance themselves from reporting. One respondent commented “Dzimwe nyaya tinongozosiya tichitya kunetswa nemapurisa” (we ignore some crimes in fear of being harassed by the police who are too inquisitive).

Closely connected to fear of rigorous police quizzing was the indicated issue that police discretion also accounts for the gap between the official crime statistics and the real crimes committed. The indications were that for a case to be recorded, the police must accept that the law has been broken. In this case the police could consider a genuine case to be too trivial to be booked especially in cases of assault and domestic violence. This poses limitation on the validity of official crime statistics in representing the actual crimes committed in the studied area.

Sixty-Five (92.9%) of the interviewed respondents mentioned corruption as the other major stumbling block which impeded other committed crimes to get to official crime records. Indications were that those with cash or kind had to bribe the police on realization that they had committed a crime attracting a penalty. One of the respondents lamented “*Kana uine mari, nyaya inongotsikwatsikwa*” (If you have cash to bribe the police the case will be gradually covered up).

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE POLICE TO GET ADEQUATE CRIME STATISTICS

The researchers noted that there were some instances where there were common challenges between the police and the victims. Furthermore participants also pointed out that police officers were also intimidated to an extent that they were not taking action on some crimes. These crimes were mentioned as those that involved their superiors with higher ranks in the police force as well as political violence or any crime involving high profile politicians and relatives. The participants indicated that police officers were threatened by termination of employment, demotion, punishment or unspecified action. If police ignore some crimes for this reason, there exists a gap between the official crime statistics and the actual crimes committed.

All the interviewed police officers (100%) also concur with the respondents that poor infrastructure posed a great challenge to implement effective policing in every village of the studied area. They also pointed that they did not have reliable transport to reach every part of the villages hence they obtained less reports of crime in inaccessible areas as compared to those areas with reliable transport and good roads. As such, official crime statistics is more closer to reality in accessible and highly patrolled areas than the inaccessible remote parts in the heart of countryside.

The police respondents also mentioned fear of police by the victims as the other factor which posed a challenge to get adequate crime statistics. They indicated that the villagers had great ‘phobia’ of the police that they tried by all means to distance themselves and did not report cases that should have been brought to book.

The Police Officers also pointed out that the secretive nature by which crime is committed also bears a great task to have reliable official crime statistics. They mentioned that most crimes were committed in secret and were hardly brought to the attention of the police. The crimes mentioned in this category were abortion, rape, fraud and domestic violence. The police also pointed out that the secretive nature of crime posed challenges if cases involved children who may not be aware that a crime has been committed.

CONCLUSION

From the findings it can be concluded that there is a gap between the official crime statistics and the real crimes committed in Ndanga Community. What is found in the police records is just tip of the iceberg. A plethora of crimes do not find their way into official crime records. As such official crime statistics have limitations and should be seen in a critical mindset. Those limitations stem from the challenges faced by both the police and the victims.

The victims indicated victimization, fear of reprisals, parallel judiciary system, poor road and telephone network, fear of embarrassment, ignorance, fear of rigorous police quizzing and corruption as factors that impeded them from making reports of crimes to the police.

Respondents also pointed out that police officers faced intimidation from the personnel in higher ranks and the high profile politicians if they deal with cases involving them or their relatives. They also indicated poor road and telephone network impeded effective police patrol in the remote parts of the area studied. The police also mentioned the secretive nature of crime and excessive fear of the police as other factors which accounted for the discrepancy between the official crime statistics and the actual crimes committed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (i) Official crime statistics have limitations and alternative measures of criminality should be sought eg, victim survey.
- (ii) The police should improve their service delivery to the victims and witnesses, so that they can be free to make reports of otherwise hidden crimes.
- (iii) The victims and the police should by all means try to report all the crimes committed against them even if they are victimized so that the offenders are brought to book.
- (iv) The Ministry of Anti-corruption should descend on corrupt police officers so that all the committed crimes and offenders are brought to book.
- (v) The Ministry of Transport and the local authority should improve the roads in the remote areas so as to increase police patrols.
- (vi) The Ministry of Home Affairs should try to establish sub-police stations in the heart of the countryside so that victims find it easy to report crimes.

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