

Case Study of Crime Data Manipulation and Misrepresentation of Crime

Pursuant to the 1986 on-campus murder of 19-year-old Lehigh University student, Jeanne Clery, all colleges and universities became mandated through congressional legislation to publish crime statistics specific to the type and quantity of crimes occurring on their campuses.¹ This legislation, the Clery Act, was the direct result of Lehigh University failing to inform Lehigh students of 38 violent crimes which had been committed three years prior to the homicide. Through this legislation, collegiate institutions are required to report incidences of homicide, manslaughter, arson, rape, robbery, burglary aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, drug offenses, liquor law violations, and illegal weapon possession.² In 1998, reporting expanded to include data on crimes which occur “reasonably contiguous” to the campus.³

Issues surrounding the reliability and validity of the data being released was quickly noted and findings revealed that some institutions were utilizing federal definitions of crime, others were using state definitions, and some were using their own definitions.⁴ Findings further revealed that sex offenses which were reported to school officials, but not to campus law enforcement, were not included in the reporting.⁵ In some cases, reporting included data from arrests of non-campus students, thereby creating issues with the consistency of the reporting. Some data illustrated a significant increase in arrests, however that was attributed to more officers and an expanded geography.⁶ The following section analyzes why specific Clery data is misleading and how the real numbers can be obtained. Exploring the motivation for not accurately presenting data along with lessons learned will offer further insight for law enforcement leaders.

In addition to promoting accountability, providing accurate data is essential towards guiding the decision-making processes and the resource management of a police agency.⁷ In reviewing a few examples of university crime statistics, it is evident that accurate data was not presented. In one example, it was noted that the University of Washington recorded 93 assaults in 1998 whereas the University of Southern California reported only four. Since the University of Southern California is in an area of high crime, it is illogical for such a disparity to exist.⁸ The fault was in the University of Southern California only reporting crimes occurring on campus, while the University of Washington reported crimes occurring in areas adjoining their campus.⁹

Similarly, the University of Washington reported 127 drug arrests in 1999, thereby making their statistics the fourth highest in the country. In reviewing this data, findings indicate that the statistics include the arrests of those who “wandered” on campus, but who were not students.¹⁰ This is misleading because their reporting standards are different than that of other institutions.

Another noted discrepancy from the University of Wisconsin was that between 1997 and 1998, there was a 132% increase in arrests for alcohol violations.¹¹ The variable creating this disparity was the fact that more officers were hired, and stronger enforcement was occurring. During this same reporting period, the University of North Carolina showed a 700% increase in drug arrests, however, they state that those numbers were based upon an expanded area of enforcement.¹²

Sexual offenses on campuses is a crime-type in which possibly the widest discrepancy exists between reported numbers and true numbers. In 2006, a total of 3,068 collegiate institutions reported zero sexual offenses.¹³ Research into that disparity reveals that the numbers reported to counseling centers were much higher than the numbers reported by the campus law enforcement agency. Two of the most notable incidents were from the University of West Virginia and the University of Iowa, as recently as 2009. The University of West Virginia had 46 sexual assaults

reported to their sexual assault prevention program, however, zero were reported in the campus' annual reporting. Similarly, the University of Iowa had 62 instances of sexual assaults reported to their victim advocacy program, yet none were listed in the campus' official statistical report.¹⁴

Sexual assault is undoubtedly a crime which has serious implications for collegiate institutions. As we look at how crime reporting can be misleading or misrepresented, it is natural to assume that there is a vested interest in having low numbers of such heinous crimes in order to ensure proper enrollment. The challenge therefore lies in defining what records are manipulated for self-interest and which are simply inaccurate due to flaws in the reporting methodologies. James Alan Fox, a criminology professor at Northeastern University, stated in part, "crime is difficult to measure but rape is the most difficult" and it is not likely that we will get an accurate statistic.¹⁵

When we look at other cases of reporting inaccuracies, it appears most often that the problem lies in the methodology of reporting. If a national standard was adopted by all collegiate institutions, there would be less discrepancy. Specifically, all reports would include arrests from contiguous streets and data of all arrestees, not solely students, would be included. Additionally, all reports will provide clarification for instances in which significant increases or decreases in any type of crime is observed, whether due to staffing changes, expanded geography, or changes in laws.

Doing this will allow for true numbers to be captured and reviewed through a comparative approach, directly in proportion to campus populations. A poignant example: In 2014, Alaska had 41 murders while Illinois had 685. The population of Alaska is 736,732 and Illinois is 12.8 million. Calculating the murder rate based upon the populations, reveals that Illinois is lower.¹⁶

The lesson indicates that we must take a holistic view of analysis, to include reviewing rates versus raw numbers. When this is done, in conjunction with uniform reporting standards, we will gain a much more accurate understanding of crime on college campuses in the United States.

References

¹ The Mismeasure of Crime, 2nd edition; Mosher, Clayton J.; Miethe, Terance D.; and Hart, Timothy C.; Sage Publications; 2011; p.19

² Ibid P.20

³ Ibid P.21

⁴ Ibid P.20

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid P. 21

⁷ LEPSL 550 Community Assessment; Module 1 Presentation 1- Introduction to Crime Data and Crime Statistics: Media Politics and the Science of Criminal Justice; Fritsvold, Eric Dr.; University of San Diego 2019

⁸ Mosher, Clayton J.; Miethe, Terance D; P. 21

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid P. 22

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid P. 23

¹⁶ LEPSL 550 Community Assessment; Module 1 Presentation 2- Organizing the Data; Fritsvold, Eric Dr.; University of San Diego 2019