

# Dimensions of the Dark Figure of Unreported Crime

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*A great deal of criminal activity in America goes unrecorded, largely because it is not reported to the police. This pool of unrecorded crime has several consequences: it limits the deterrent capability of the criminal justice system, it contributes to the misallocation of police resources, it renders victims ineligible for public and private benefits, it affects insurance costs, and it helps shape the police role in society. This report examines these problems in light of new crime-victim data gathered in a national sample of the general population. The data suggest that, compared with those incidents which were reported to the police, the reservoir of unreported crime contains a disproportionate number of less serious incidents involving small financial loss, little serious injury, and less use of weapons. Race, in particular, was unrelated to the reporting of crime in the United States in 1973.*

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A GREAT DEAL of the criminal activity that goes on in the United States evades the attention of monitoring systems devised to measure its volume and distribution and to record the identity of its victims. The existence of this reservoir of unrecorded crime has a number of vexatious consequences. It limits the deterrent capability of the criminal justice system, for it shields offenders from police action. In the increasingly large number of cities which distribute police manpower and equipment in response to demands for service, it contributes to the misallocation of resources and leads to the understatement of protection due certain victims under "equal crime coverage" policies. It may help shape the police role: the selective non-recognition of certain classes of activity in their environment may enable

the police to avoid the organizational and individual innovations that would be demanded by serious confrontation of these problems. The victims of crimes who do not become "officially known" to the criminal justice system thereby also become ineligible for many of the supportive and ameliorative benefits supplied by public and private agencies. Finally, the pool of unrecorded criminal incidents shapes the "socialized" costs of crime: private insurance premiums and the public cost of victim compensation programs are affected by the number and character of events that remain hidden from view.

The development of new techniques for measuring crime may shed some additional light on the magnitude of problems associated with the "dark figure" of unrecorded crime. Population surveys can pro-

vide new information on one portion of the dark figure, those incidents that were not brought to the attention of the police but are later recalled in an interview. Our knowledge of criminal events is obscured by other sources of error, to be sure, but there is some reason to believe that citizen nonreporting is more important than most police nonrecording practices in determining the magnitude of official crime statistics.<sup>1</sup> This essay explores some of the characteristics of unreported incidents, using data from a national survey of the victims of crime. It examines the social consequences, for victims and for society, of the entry or non-entry of events into the crime recording process. To the extent that the operation of the criminal justice system and related institutions is shaped by demands for service, the volume and character of reported and unreported crime are powerful determinants of the consequences of and responses to criminal victimization.

### Knowing about Crime

The problem is well known: an activity which is by some criterion a crime may occur without being registered in the systems devised to count it, thus reducing the accuracy of inferences from the data. This elusive subtotal was dubbed "the dark figure of crime" by European criminologists.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of the threat to valid inference posed by this pool of unmeasured events has stimulated the development of new

procedures for probing its dimensions and greater care by users of official crime data. It is now always necessary to refute systematically all plausible, error-based, rival interpretations of research findings based on reported crime data.

The dark figure of criminality has been examined by the use of techniques that elicit anonymous confessions of delinquency directly from offenders. These self-reporting studies generally suggest that inferences based on arrest data unduly skew the distribution of criminality in the direction of minorities and the poor.<sup>3</sup> While European scholars long insisted that court statistics (which "correct" police errors in construing events and making arrests) were the best measure of the true distribution of crime, observational studies of charging decisions, preliminary hearings, and plea bargaining have laid that argument to rest.<sup>4</sup> Field studies of patrol performance indicate the enormous impact of police organization and tactics upon arrest totals and even on the decision that a crime has occurred.<sup>5</sup> Finally, both proactive and reactive procedures have been developed to provide ways for the victims or witnesses of crime to regis-

3. Richard Quinney, *The Social Reality of Crime* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970).

4. F. H. McClintock, "The Dark Figure," in *Collected Studies in Criminological Research*, vol. 4 (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 1970), pp. 7-34.

5. Donald M. McIntyre, "A Study of Judicial Dominance of the Charging Process," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, December 1968, pp. 463-90; Abraham Blumberg, *Criminal Justice* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967); Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *The Police and the Public* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Donald J. Black, "Production of Crime Rates," *American Sociological Review*, August 1970, pp. 733-48.

1. Wesley G. Skogan, "Measurement Problems in Official and Survey Crime Rates," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Spring 1975, pp. 17-31.

2. Albert D. Biderman and Albert J. Reiss, Jr., "On Exploring the 'Dark Figure' of Crime," *Annals*, November 1967, pp. 1-15.

ter their experiences. "Heroin Hot Lines" and consumer fraud complaint offices are data-collection devices that open channels for citizen-initiated information, while victimization surveys require only the passive participation of those respondents chosen to represent their fellow citizens.

These efforts are important, for errors in the measurement of crime-related phenomena may have serious consequences: they create and conceal major social problems, and they complicate the interpretation of crime statistics and the validity of statistical inferences made from them. Errors in our knowledge of the volume and distribution of criminal incidents may considerably disguise human misery and limit our ability to understand even the most basic facts about society.

The social consequences of the failure of citizens to record their experiences may be considerable. First, failing to register criminal acts with the authorities virtually assures their perpetrators immunity from the attention of the police. While they may be harassed on general grounds or in response to other suspicions, those who prey upon individuals who will not or cannot relate their experiences to the police enjoy considerable advantages. This is well understood by criminals who victimize youths, homosexuals, minorities, or their fellow felons, and it redoubles the burden of the social and economic disadvantages that those victims already bear. While the empirical evidence on deterrence processes is mixed, it is too early to write off the pursuit of a great number (in fact, probably a numerical majority) of offenders.<sup>6</sup>

6. George E. Antunes and A. Lee Hunt, "The Impact of Certainty and Severity on

Those whose victimizations do not enter the system may also receive less routine protection in return. Increasingly, big-city police departments allocate manpower and equipment in response to the distribution of demands for their services. These are measured primarily by crimes known to the police, usually weighted to reflect their "seriousness" or the probability that a swift response will produce an arrest. Victimization which are not reported to the police can attract neither future deterrent effort in the neighborhood nor event-specific responses from the criminal justice system.

Reporting practices may also shape the police mandate. The self-image of the policeman is that of a "crime fighter"; police officers see themselves as strong, masculine protectors of the weak against criminal predators.<sup>7</sup> In reality, a great deal of their time is spent resolving or suppressing conflicts which have little to do with this role model: assaults in bars, husbands beating their wives (and wives killing their husbands), and disputes between neighbors over land or property. In fact, a large number of behaviorally "illegal" activities take place between persons who know, live with, or are related to each other. There is growing recognition in police circles that traditional forms of police intervention into these relationships may be unproduc-

Levels of Crime in American States: An Extended Analysis," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, December 1973, pp. 486-93; Harold Votey and Lad Phillips, "An Economic Analysis of the Deterrent Effect of Law Enforcement on Criminal Activity," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, September 1972, pp. 335-42.

7. Arthur Niederhoffer, *Behind the Shield: The Police in Urban Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

tive and that new styles of police operation may be required.<sup>8</sup> Police officers and police unions, on the other hand, usually resist the grafting of "social work" onto their role and struggle to define their mission in ways more congruent with their preferred self-image.

A problematic aspect of this role conflict is the extent to which differences in reporting rates reinforce one task definition or another. Reporting practices in part set the agenda for police work. If problems brought to the police reflect the universe of problems only selectively, this will have some impact upon police operations. In this case, if the pool of reported crimes is more likely to contain victimizations perpetrated by anonymous assailants, the workload facing the police will favor the perpetuation of the traditional police role; on the other hand, changes in reporting practices might divert from the pool of unreported events those calling for different kinds of skills, making new demands upon police departments.

Nonreporting may also affect the distribution of ameliorative programs designed to confer financial benefits, psychological support, or special protection for the victims of crime. For example, public and private rape crisis intervention units cannot fulfill their intended functions in the absence of information about incidents; special tactical units cannot provide protection for unknown victims or apprehend offenders who prey upon frequently victimized, nonreporting establishments. Funds for the rebuilding of public and private space

8. Raymond Parnas, "Police Discretion and Diversion of Incidents of Intra-Family Violence," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Autumn 1971, pp. 539-65.

to render them more "defensible," high-intensity street lighting, and other efforts to physically structure neighborhood safety may be allocated in response to measured need.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, several states are implementing programs for compensation of victims of physical attacks.<sup>10</sup> Like private insurance programs, public victim compensation schemes (which socialize the cost of our inability to protect individuals from violence) depend upon the assertion of claims by those who suffered injury. Variations in victim-reporting practices will affect insurance premium rates and the cost to the taxpayer of public claims, as well as the distribution of individual benefits.

In short, information about the volume and distribution of criminal incidents plays an important role in shaping the response of private agencies and the state to crime. Events which do not register on social indicators—events which are not "officially known"—will evade attempts to redress their dysfunctional consequences.

### The Data

The data employed here to probe the dimensions of unreported victimization were gathered through a national sample survey designed to measure the incidence of crimes against households and individuals in the United States. Conducted by the Bureau of the Census, the program involves continuing interviews with all residents twelve years of age and

9. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

10. Herbert Edelhertz and Gilbert Geis, *Public Compensation to Victims of Crime* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

older in a rotating national panel of 60,000 households.<sup>11</sup> The large sample is necessary to uncover a workable number of such events as robbery and rape and to make reasonable inferences from the sample to the population. The interview schedule is designed to elicit self-reports from victims of some of the crimes which the FBI has placed on its Part I list: rape, robbery, assault, larceny, burglary, and auto theft. Homicide, a well-understood and infrequent event (and one which leaves no victim capable of reporting it) was not considered. The survey items have been subjected to an extensive series of methodological tests.<sup>12</sup>

Estimates of the magnitude of unreported crime are based upon respondents' recollections of their actions. After eliciting details of the incidents from their victims, interviewers inquired whether they were brought to the attention of the police. Each incident may thus be treated as "reported" or "unreported," giving us an empirical handle on events that did not become official statistics.

This measure of unreported crime is itself subject to error. In some circles it may be socially desirable to recall that one reported an event to the authorities, and this will inflate survey estimates of "crimes which should be known to the police." More important is the problem of nonrecall.

11. Official findings from the National Survey are reported in *Criminal Victimization in the United States: 1973 Advance Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, May 1975).

12. U.S. Dept. of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Statistics Division, *San Jose Methods Test of Known Crime Victims*, Statistics Technical Report No. 1., 1971.

Methodological tests of the victimization survey instrument indicate that certain classes of events, notably rape and assaults between friends or relatives, sometimes are not recalled even in anonymous, face-to-face interviews.<sup>13</sup> This survey's practice of "bounding" the visit of the interviewer with a previous visit to encourage victims to remember their experiences, asking respondents to recall only serious crimes, and requiring brief periods of recall (in the national survey, only six months) alleviates many of the methodological shortcomings of earlier victimization surveys.<sup>14</sup> But the "doubly dark" figure of crime which is reported neither to the police nor to an interviewer remains elusive.

### Volume and Distribution of Crime

According to estimates projected from a national sample of victims of crime in the United States in 1973, there were more than 34-million incidents of auto theft, robbery, burglary, rape, assault, and larceny. (See Table 1.) Most of them went unreported, the victims recollecting that less than one-third of these incidents—28 per cent—were reported to the police. Even if the police did not err in classifying and processing incidents which were brought to their attention, it appears that, of every 100 crimes that actually occurred, 72 were not recorded in official statistics.

Table 1 also indicates that non-

13. *Ibid.*

14. Philip H. Ennis, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A Report on a National Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1967); Albert D. Biderman *et al.*, *Report on a Pilot Study in the District of Columbia on Victimization and Attitudes toward Law Enforcement* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1967).

TABLE 1  
VOLUME AND DISTRIBUTION OF REPORTED AND UNREPORTED CRIME IN THE U.S., 1973

Crime	Total No. of Incidents	Reported to the Police		Not Reported to the Police		% of All Nonreported Incidents
		No.	%	No.	%	
Auto theft	1,330,470	904,720	68%	425,750	32%	1.7%
Robbery	950,770	465,877	49%	484,893	51%	2.0%
Burglary	6,433,030	2,959,194	46%	3,473,836	54%	14.0%
Rape	153,050	67,342	44%	85,708	56%	0.4%
Assault	3,517,990	1,407,196	40%	2,110,794	60%	8.5%
Larceny	22,176,370	3,991,747	18%	18,184,623	82%	73.0%
Total	34,561,680	9,796,076	28%	24,765,604	72%	99.6%

SOURCE: Calculated by the author from advance incident tabulations supplied by the Bureau of the Census.

reporting varies considerably by offense type, ranging from 32 per cent in incidents of auto theft to 82 per cent for larceny.<sup>15</sup> Robberies and burglaries were not reported to the police in a little more than half the instances. Rape was not reported in 56 per cent of the cases; assault, not reported in 60 per cent. Larceny shows the widest gap between actual incidence and official reporting. In 1973, thefts from individuals and households constituted about 64 per cent of all crime, but only about 18 per cent of them found their way into police reports. How significant is this discrepancy?

### Social Consequences of Nonreporting

Contrary to considerable speculation about the portentous implications of unreported crime, these data indicate that the vast pool of incidents which do not come to the atten-

tion of the police does not conceal a large amount of serious crime with immediate social significance and does not further disadvantage groups in the population already burdened with other disabilities.

The first popular hypothesis is that nonreporting works to the disadvantage of racial minorities. It is often argued that the victimization experiences of blacks are less likely to be reported to the police. Traditional police-ghetto hostility, the unwillingness of many police officers to take complaints by blacks seriously, simple nonresponse by the police to calls for assistance, and outright citizen fear of any encounters with these representatives of the dominant society have all been cited as reasons for the presumed undercounting of the crime experiences of black citizens. While these data cannot speak to the organizational effectiveness of the police once complaints have been entered, they indicate clearly that race is not related in any simple way to patterns of crime reporting.

15. Limited by definition in this survey to thefts from households and individuals.

TABLE 2  
THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNREPORTED CRIME

<i>U.S. Pop. Est. N*</i>		<i>All Household Incidents v. Race of Household Head</i>					
		<i>White</i>			<i>Black</i>		
Reported	8,750,960	89.2%			10.8%		
Unreported	20,552,410	91.3%			8.7%		
$C = .03$							
		<i>Household Larcenies v. the Value of Stolen Items</i>					
		<i>\$1-9</i>	<i>\$10-24</i>	<i>\$25-49</i>	<i>\$50-99</i>	<i>\$100-249</i>	<i>\$250+</i>
Reported	4,910,530	11.8%	12.1%	17.3%	23.7%	23.6%	11.5%
Unreported	16,695,660	45.4%	24.2%	14.6%	9.0%	5.0%	1.6%
$\theta = .62$							
		<i>Robbery (without Physical Assault) v. Use of a Weapon</i>					
		<i>Weapon</i>			<i>No Weapon</i>		
Reported	243,780	51.8%			48.2%		
Unreported	355,480	30.2%			69.8%		
$C = .21$							
		<i>All Personal Incidents v. Relationship between Victim and Offender</i>					
		<i>Stranger</i>			<i>Not Stranger</i>		
Reported	2,080,770	69.3%			30.7%		
Unreported	2,972,790	65.8%			34.2%		
$C = .04$							

\*The number of incidents for the U.S. as a whole for 1973, as estimated from the survey. Excludes a relatively small number of “don’t know” responses.

SOURCE: Advance tabulations supplied by the Bureau of the Census.

Table 2 compares the distribution of reported and unreported household offenses (burglary, larceny, auto theft) across racial categories. For this class of offenses, nonreporting in fact is more commonly found among white victims; unreported crime is fractionally more likely to involve whites than blacks. The extremely low correlation between reporting and race (contingency coefficient = .03) indicates that this cleavage is not substantially re-

lated to the burdens and benefits attendant on crime reporting: the effect is similar across many subdivisions of crime (including personal crimes of passion and profit) and across major UCR categories; rarely does nonreporting vary by more than 2 per cent across racial lines.

This lack of co-variation suggests that nonreporting does not play a major role in shaping the distribution by race of goods and services made

available by governments in response to the crime problem. *Nonreporting* does not deflate the apparent need of blacks for increased police protection, and it does not guarantee greater immunity from apprehension for predators in the black community. Crime remains hidden from the authorities and thus cannot be employed to allocate squad cars or justify foot patrols, but the burden of this misallocation does not fall along racial lines. Likewise, the data suggest that victim compensation programs are unlikely to reinforce existing disparities between blacks and whites; the "eligibility" of victims from both groups is unaffected by the distribution of officially known events.

Data presented in Table 2 also indicate that the pool of unreported events does not harbor a great deal of serious crime, incidents which cause substantial social harm but which remain hidden. First, unreported property crime tends to involve relatively small amounts of money. Table 2 presents the distribution of the value of household goods lost to thieves, divided into reported and unreported categories. The vast majority of unreported larcenies of this type involve small financial loss: in 84 per cent of the incidents the lost merchandise was worth less than \$50. Less than 7 per cent of these thefts involved more than \$100. It should not be surprising that in this survey, as in other victim surveys, "it wasn't worth the effort," "it was inconvenient," or "it was unimportant" are frequently volunteered excuses for nonreporting. It also should be noted that \$50 is usually the lower limit for insurance claims, which may explain why the relative volume of unreported theft drops at that point.

The bulk of unreported personal

crime also appears to be less serious than incidents which were brought to the attention of the police. The victims of these events are less likely to be injured, they lose less if there is a robbery or theft (and those incidents are more likely to be unsuccessful attempts), and unreported incidents are less likely than reported ones to breach the security of the victim's home. Table 2 presents a breakdown of another measure of the seriousness of crime, the use of a weapon. Crimes involving weapons are much more likely to result in injury or death and to undermine the morale of the community. These effects are recognized in many states by statutes which impose harsher penalties upon felons who employ guns. Table 2 indicates that a substantial number of unreported robberies do involve the use of a weapon (about 30 per cent), but that many more (by 22 per cent) reported events can be counted as serious by this measure. While a significant amount of crime involving weapons continues to remain unknown to the police, incidents which come to the attention of the authorities are much more likely to be serious.

To the extent that the police role is shaped by the nature of their task, reporting practices may shape police work by determining the distribution of problems facing officers. If nonreporting reduces the proportion of domestic disturbances or other nonstranger crimes entering the criminal justice system, pressure for the adoption of crisis-intervention or dispute-settlement roles for police officers may be reduced. Table 2 reports the distribution of unreported and reported crime across the relationship between victims and their assailants. The category "stranger,"



in this case, includes unknown attackers and those known only "by sight." As Table 2 illustrates, differences in the distribution of reported and unreported crime were slight: 69 per cent of all personal crimes which were reported to the police involved strangers, while 66 per cent of unreported incidents were of the anonymous variety. Within the personal crime category, only simple rape (not involving theft) differed markedly by offender: unreported rapes were 14 per cent more likely to involve nonstrangers than reported rapes. The comparable difference for personal larceny (picked pockets, purse snatchings) was only 0.8 per cent. It does not appear that general increases in reporting rates would greatly affect the *distribution* of demands for radically different forms of police service, although it certainly would affect their volume.

### Summary and Conclusions

It has long been argued that official statistics fail to reflect the volume of events which are by some definition a crime. A major source of this error has been attributed to the non-reporting of events to the police. While some types of criminal events are relatively fully reported (homicide, successful auto theft), for others the modal event is not brought to the attention of the authorities. In a 1973 national survey of crime victims, the reporting rate for simple larceny was only 18 per cent.

There has been considerable speculation about nonreporting and its consequences for crime victims and the operation of the criminal justice system. The vast pool of unreported crime (estimated by this survey to approach 24-million incidents in 1973) could conceal a great deal of

human misery, isolate deserving victims from the ameliorative activities of the state, shield dangerous criminals from official attention, and shape the operation of the criminal justice system by defining the nature of its day-to-day workload. All the pernicious consequences of non-reporting could overlay existing social cleavages, redoubling the burdens of those who already suffer disproportionately from other social evils.

While it is not possible to speak to all of these issues in detail through the analysis of survey data, figures from the 1973 victimization survey conducted by the Census Bureau suggest that general shifts in reporting rates would not greatly affect the present distribution of known crime across many social and behavioral categories. The pool of unreported crime consists mainly of minor property offenses. Unreported crimes against persons appear to be of less social significance than those which are brought to the attention of the police. The victims of unreported personal crime are much less likely to have been injured, their financial losses are small, and weapons are less likely to have been employed by the offenders. The pool of unreported incidents does not appear to conceal a disproportionate array of intra-acquaintance offenses, and changes in reporting habits may not dramatically affect the relative mix of crime-fighting and social-working demanded of the police. (However, some serious methodological problems cloud the interpretation of this aspect of the data.) Finally, across a number of crime categories, there were virtually no racial differences in the distribution of known and officially unknown incidents. Whatever

the burdens of nonreporting, they do not appear to reinforce racial cleavages.

A great deal of research remains to be done on the social and individual *consequences* of nonreporting. Those who report crimes become enmeshed in stressful social and organizational processes. They must confront the police and they may face prosecutors, courts, and the hostile glares of their assailants. Given the debilitating round of appearances and continuances facing victims or witnesses in many criminal courts and the fear that threats of reprisal may generate along the way, it is important to discover whether the ultimate adjustment to their new status arrived at by the victims of crime is any happier than among those whose problems never come to the attention of the state. There is good reason to suspect that it often is not. There also have

been no experimental or *post hoc* analyses of the effects of programs aimed at increasing the rate at which citizens report crimes to the police, except for the impact that fluctuation in reporting has on official crime statistics.<sup>16</sup> It is important that we discover the effects of media campaigns, police-community relations programs, and the implementation of victim-compensation schemes upon the rate at which the problems of particular subgroups in the population come to the attention of the police. There simply are no data upon which to estimate the temporal stability of even the simple relationships reported here.

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16. Anne L. Schneider, "The Portland Evaluation Studies: Uses of Victimization Surveys for Evaluation and Planning," paper presented at the National Conference on Patterns of Criminal Victimization, Washington, D.C., June 1975.