



## **Whatever happened to the *grey figure*? Recording crime in England and Wales, 1981-2004**

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A crime is recorded by the police mainly because it is reported by the public, usually by victims. In an ideal world, there should be no gap or ‘error’ between the rate of reporting incidents *to* the police and the rate of recording *by* the police. Yet in the early days of the British Crime Survey, it became apparent that a substantial gap or *Grey Figure* existed between the two (Bottomley and Pease, 1986). In its review of crime statistics, the Home Office (2000) thought the Grey Figure resulted from inconsistencies in recording practice between police forces. The *National Crime Recording Standard* (NCRS) sought to abolish discretionary recording practices by including further amendment of the *Counting Rules*, implemented from April 2002.

The rate of discretionary police crime recording is affected by a number of factors, for instance: an *obligation* to record crime, due, for example, to public pressure (as in the case of sexual violence) or in responding to insurers’ claim requirements regarding theft and loss; accounting to the public (the NCRS principle of *victim-focussed recording* means counting more of what is already recorded); and demonstrating effectiveness (between 1999 and 2004 the Home Office obliged the police to achieve specified reductions in domestic burglary, theft of vehicles, and robbery). The obligation to ‘do something’, therefore, leads to additional workload and performance pressures on the police. Unfortunately, both are measured by the rate of recorded crime. Different circumstances lead to different pressures and different discretionary performance adjustments: when crime is going up, the pressure to do something is magnified at

the same time as workload pressure is increasing; but when it is dropping, the police can afford to do more as long as they have the same resources at their disposal.

To test this notion, two indices were constructed (data are from *Crime in England and Wales, 2003/04*): (1) a *Volume of Reported Crime Index* ( defined as the product of the Victimisation Rate (Table 2.02) and the proportion of incidents reported to the police (Table 3.02), with 1981 = 100); and (2) a *Grey Figure Rate* – the proportion of crimes reported to the police that appear to have been recorded (defined as the ratio of offences recorded by police (Table 3.04) to comparable crimes reported to police (Table 3.02) ). A comparison is made between the period 1981-1991, well before either the drop in crime or the implementation of the NCRS, and 1991-2003/04, during which the number of recorded crimes dropped (indicated by the Volume Reported Crime Index) and the NCRS was introduced.

The BCS records separately Burglary with Loss and Nil-Loss Burglaries (including attempted burglaries). Figures 1 and 2 show the different ways in which the Grey Figure responded to changes in the volume of these offences. Both offences were subject to the same crime reduction performance pressure. However, while Burglary involving loss also entails (insurance-required) recording obligations, attempted and nil-Loss Burglaries do not. This can be seen in the much lower recording rate for the latter. Figure 1 shows that when the volume of Burglaries with Loss went up, the recording rate went down, presumably reflecting a workload adjustment. Happily, when the volume of reported with loss burglaries declined in the second period and the concomitant workload pressure subsided, the police could afford to let the recording rate rise again (almost to the maximum), thus satisfying their recording obligation without prejudicing their performance requirement.

Conversely, neither obligation nor crime reduction requirement apply to Attempted and Nil-Loss Burglaries, so that the recording rate remained low and constant across both periods, irrespective of a similar boom-and-bust trend in the volume of this crime. Furthermore, since the volume of Attempts and Nil-Loss Burglaries reported had declined less than the volume of with-loss burglaries, the former now become a proportionately bigger part of the total burglary figure. This encouraged the view that the Government's crime reduction programme might have worked because what had been thought of as the rate of unsuccessful burglaries (i.e. those that did not entail loss) appeared to have increased.

Of course, none of these figures shed any light whatsoever on what drives the ‘real’ rate of burglary in the community; but it does suggest how police practice responds to the changing demands made upon the police service. Nevertheless, the practice of publishing the data that would allow us to see if the Grey Figure still existed was discontinued following the implementation of the National Crime Recording Standard.

## **References:**

Bottomley, K. and Pease, K. (1986) *Crime and Punishment: Interpreting the Data*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Home Office (2000). *Review of Crime Statistics: A Discussion Document*. London: Home Office.

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## APPENDIX

Figure 1:

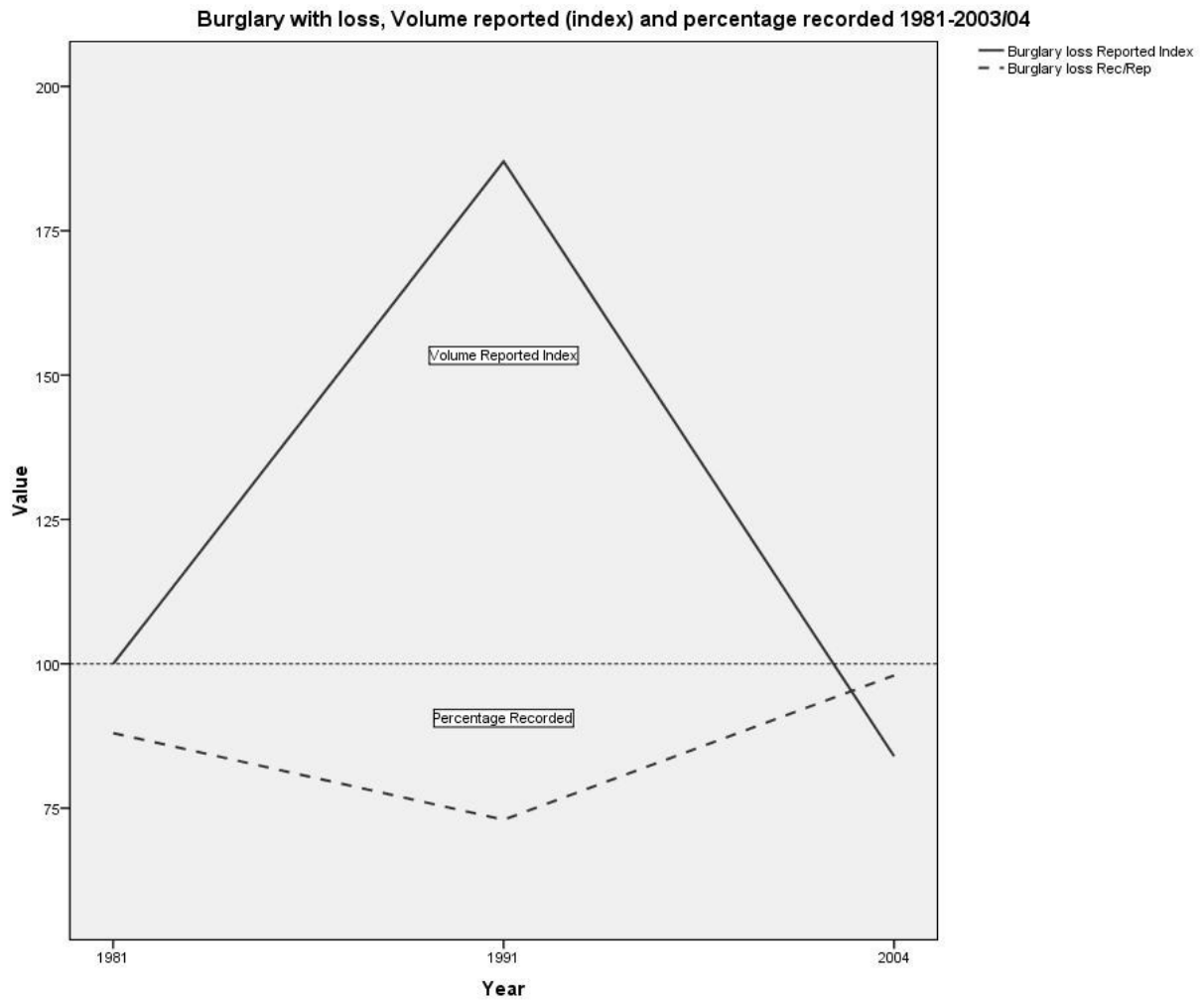


Figure 2:

