Forensic Psychology

Defining and Measuring Crime

Problems with Defining Crime

- Crime can be defined as any act that breaks the law and therefore requires a form of punishment. However, this definition does not consider that laws are subject to change and not all acts that break the law are punished.
- Cultural issues with defining crime – In one culture what may be considered criminal may differ from another. For example, having more than one wife in the UK is a crime of bigamy. However, in some cultures this is not considered a crime and is encouraged.
- Historical issues with defining crime – Definitions change over time – e.g. smacking a child was outlawed in 2004 in the Children’s Act.

Ways of Measuring Crime

- Official statistics – government records the total number of crimes reported to police and recorded in the official figures. Published by the Home Office annually and are useful in showing specific crimes in specific regions. Allows the government to develop crime prevention strategies and policing initiatives, giving resources to areas which need it the most.
  - Unreliable as they significantly understate the number of crimes occurring – only 25% of crimes are included in the figures. Other 75% make up ‘the dark figure of crime’. Police in Nottinghamshire were more likely than other regions to record thefts of under £10 (Farrington and Dowds, 1985).
- Victim surveys – record people’s experience of crime over a period of time. The Crime Survey for England and Wales asks people to document how many times they have been the victim of crime over the past year. 50,000 households are randomly selected to take part each year.
  + More likely to record details of crimes that were not reported to the police and so are considered more useful. 2006/7 official stats suggested a 2% increase in crime whereas the British Crime Survey suggested a 3% increase.
  - Telescoping may occur – victim may misremember an event as happening within the past year when it did not and so may distort the figure.
- Offender surveys – individuals offering details of the number and type of crimes they have committed. Targets groups of likely offenders based on risk factors. The Offender Crime and Justice Survey ran from 2003 to 2006 and provided a measurement of crime and of repeat offending, trends in the prevalence of offending, drug and alcohol use, the role of co-offenders and the relationship between perpetrators and victims.
  + Provides an insight into how many people are responsible for certain offences.
  - May be unreliable – victims may want to conceal some of the offences they have committed or may over exaggerate for reasons of bravado.
- Offender may compensate financially.

Restorative Justice Council (RJC)
- Independent body that establishes clear standards for the use of restorative justice and support victims and specialists.

Evaluation
- Diversity of programmes – degree of flexibility in the way that it is carried out.
- Relies on offender showing remorse – some may sign up for scheme to avoid prison and no real remorse is felt.
- Expensive – specialist professionals are required.