The Data and Their Limitations

The data featured in *City Crime Rankings* come from the FBI publication *Crime in the United States* (2014), which is available every fall (e.g., November 2014) and presents information for the previous year (e.g., 2013). This report is based on data collected through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, which began in 1930. The purpose of the UCR Program has been to develop reliable information about crime reported to law enforcement that can be used by law enforcement as well as by criminologists, sociologists, legislators, municipal planners, and the media for a variety of research and planning purposes. Although the program is voluntary, in 2013 more than 18,000 city, university and college, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies provide information representing 98% of the population (FBI, 2014a).

Although law enforcement agencies collect common information on crimes reported to and discovered by them, each state has slightly different criminal laws, and each law enforcement agency has its own policies and procedures for recording activity. These differences make it very difficult to compare statistics across agencies. To classify criminal activity consistently, the UCR Program was created. The UCR Program provides national standards for the uniform classification of crimes and arrests (for further details, visit the FBI's Web site at http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/crimestats). Notably, the UCR crime definitions are distinct and do not conform to federal or state laws.

There are well-documented criticisms of the UCR data that must be considered when using these data for any purpose. But while the nature of the data and their limitations should be understood, they should not preclude researchers, practitioners, and others from using the data to understand crime and guide policy decisions. The following is a brief discussion of the major issues and concerns surrounding UCR data.

While individual law enforcement agencies classify reported crimes based on the laws of their own states and jurisdictions, these agencies reclassify these crimes according to UCR definitions when reporting them and provide aggregate counts of (a) particular crimes (known as Part I crimes: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) and (b) arrests for all crimes. Note that the FBI does not report the aggregate counts of Part II crimes—including simple assault, fraud, prostitution, and DUI—it reports only the arrests that occur. Thus, when statistics about reported violent and property crime are published in this or any other book or article, they are only based on the eight Part I crimes.

In addition, UCR reporting requires the use of a hierarchical coding system that means if two crimes happen during one incident, only one is counted. For example, if one person is the victim of both rape and robbery, only the rape will be counted, or if a car is stolen out of a locked garage, it is considered a burglary, not a burglary and an auto theft. The UCR Program has specific rules for coding that are not detailed here; however, the result is that the actual number of reported crimes might be underestimated in that the number of incidents is counted and not the number of unique crimes that occur.

The factor of actual versus reported crime is probably the most important one to consider when interpreting statistics based on UCR data. That is, the data provided to the FBI contain only those crimes reported or known to law enforcement as opposed to all crime that has actually occurred. We know from victimization surveys that not all crimes are reported to law enforcement (Truman & Langton, 2014) and that different types of crimes are reported at different levels. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey that violent crime was reported to police 45.6% in 2013, 44.2% in 2012, and 50.3% in 2004. Property crime was reported 36.1% in 2013, 33.5% in 2012, and 39.2% in 2004 (Truman & Langton, 2014). When UCR data are analyzed, we must recognize that the data do not represent the actual amount of crime. However, if the data are collected accurately and consistently, they can be used, with caution, to make comparisons across geographic areas and over time.

Additional criticisms of the UCR data include inaccuracy due to inputting errors and handling of missing data (Lynch & Jarvis, 2008; Maltz, 1999), pressure on some law enforcement agencies to "doctor" the numbers, and the use of aggregate numbers that mask other factors such as time of day, location, and circumstance of the crime (e.g., whether the crime is committed by a stranger or family member). Yet, the UCR data are the most comprehensive and consistently collected data on crime in the United States. In most cases, analysis of UCR data begins the conversation, and additional in-depth analysis of crime in local areas is required to really understand the nature and context of crime problems (Santos, 2013).