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8 QUESTIONS TO MATHIAS BUG

Crime Statistics: "Dark Figure" Survey to Correct Police Statistics

1. Mr. Bug, when measuring crime risk, what are the main problems that arise? The main problem with crime risk assessment is that we have to rely on data from the official German police crime statistics (PKS). These statistics are not without their problems, though, because they only contain data on crime that the police are aware of. The other problem with the statistics is that the numbers of individual offenses are simply added together. The picture that emerges is not properly weighted and might not depict the actual crime risk. Taking the PKS data as a basis, our aim is to incorporate the varying degrees of severity that the different offenses have.

2. What does that mean for the perception of official police crime statistics in Germany? The results of our poll show that people do distinguish between various forms of crime and rank them differently. They also reflect on the severity of individual criminal offenses. Respondents were asked what weighting they would give each offense. The findings are very similar to those resulting from the monetization method previously used in economic research.

3. Can you explain what the monetization method is? This a method used in economic research in which each type of offense is assigned a monetary value. The central criticism leveled at this approach is putting a price on even a life or a murder. What we did, however, was standardize the "cost" of the damage. In other words, we set murder at the value 1 and the remaining offense categories as fractions of this.

4. What role is played by unreported crime or the "dark figure" of crime? The "dark figure" of crime is one of the main criticisms made with regard to the explanatory potential of police crime statistics. This figure varies from one offense to the next. The type of offense that is seldom reported to the police is, for example, petty crime, but also serious offenses such as domestic violence often go unreported. On the other hand, we have offense categories where the victims are compelled to file a report with the police, for instance, to be able to claim damages from insurance. This includes home invasion as well as everyday crimes such as car theft. What we noticed, though, was that even in the case of home invasion, the "dark figure" is very high, despite the fact that it is normally in the victim's interest to report a break-in.

5. How do you determine how high the dark figure of crime actually is? The only way to ascertain the extent of the dark figure is to conduct a large-scale opinion poll. This is necessary because only a small percentage of people will be victims of crime so you need a really large number of respondents to make sure your sample contains enough victims. Actually, with the 12,000 respondents in our study, we were still at the lower end of the scale.

6. How is crime risk distributed across Germany? Basically, there is an urban-rural gap, meaning there is more crime in urban areas than in rural regions. Crime that affects the individual directly—in other words, everyday crime—occurs more frequently in urban areas. There is also a north-south divide, with the northern regions being affected worse by crime than, say, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria.

7. How has crime developed in Germany in recent years? In the past four years, the period covered by our study, crime in Germany has neither declined nor increased noticeably. The north-south divide has likewise remained more or less unchanged over recent years.

8. How can crime statistics be improved? One vital aspect would be to carry out a dark figure survey parallel to police crime statistics every year or two. This would be quite costly but would give a far clearer picture of the actual crime risk in Germany.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg.

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