

Perspectives on policing

Mixed signals for police improvement: *The value of your Crime Severity Score may go up as well as down*

PAPER 1

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The development of a Crime Severity Score for England and Wales¹ by the Office for National Statistics represents an important step towards a more sophisticated, 'two-dimensional' understanding of police-recorded crime data. In this paper I start to unpick what it tells us about recent changes in the policing environment, point out its limitations as a tool for understanding crime change and flag-up some potential hazards in its usage, particularly as a tool for making judgements about 'performance'. I argue that its main value is to make central a set of 'severe' (high-tariff, high-harm, high-demand) abuse crimes that are recorded in relatively low (but growing) numbers, and for which changes in the volume recorded by the police are a poor indicator of change in actual incidence. This rebalancing should force us to reconsider the meanings we attach to the ups and downs of police-recorded crime (whether weighted or otherwise) and to challenge the habit of seeing progress in reduction. Finally, I put forward suggestions for some non-traditional crime data divisions – such as between 'abuse' and

'reduce' crime, 'patent' and 'latent' demand crime and 'initial' and 'repeat' victim crime - that might prove useful for disambiguating aggregate Crime Severity Scores, and providing a more three-dimensional perspective on crime, police practice and on the relationships between the two.

Crime in two dimensions

It is becoming increasingly obvious that counting the number of crime reports the police accumulate in the course of their work is a one dimensional – and therefore inadequate – way of addressing questions like; *is society getting safer or more dangerous? How good a job are the police doing? What should they be doing differently? And, what demand is being placed on police resources?*

Part of the problem (but only part of it, and I'll come to the rest later) is that all crimes are not equal. One murder case represents substantially more harm to society, and (in reflection of this) receives significantly more police resource, than (say) a complaint about criminal damage, and so just adding these together and concluding that crime is rising or falling really tells us very little. It's a bit like trying to assess the healthiness of your diet by counting the things on your dinner plate – in both

¹ ONS (2016a).

cases we need to know something about the *quality* as well as the quantity of the items being enumerated to draw useful conclusions.

This is the imperative behind the search for a weighted crime measure. Rather like counting the calories in different foodstuffs, if the 'potency' of different crimes can be determined, as well as the frequency with which they occur, we can start to aggregate the total amount of crime-related harm (or 'severity', or demand) in different places and over various periods of time, which should help us say something more meaningful about what is going on, how well the police are doing and what they might do differently.

The search for an integrated way of measuring the volume and gravity of crime is not new; over the years various methods have been devised for attaching tariffs to crime categories using questionnaire ratings², cost estimates³ or victim assessments of impact⁴. Opinion, however, seems to be swinging behind court sentencing as the most democratically 'objective' method for comparing offence severity, as used, for example, in the Canadian Crime Severity Index⁵, the Cambridge Harm Index⁶, and most recently in the prototype Crime Severity Score⁷ put out for consultation by the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS).

The latter advocates (and demonstrates) the use of actual sentencing data (rather than guidelines⁸) to determine the average severity of sanctions handed down by English and Welsh courts, for more than 200 types of crime, over a five year period. It proposes that these form the basis for a set of weights – ranging from a score of three for

Possession of Cannabis to 7,979 for Homicide – which are nominally the average number of days' imprisonment handed down for each offence type, (with equivalents calculated for non-custodial sanctions), but more importantly represent the *relative* severity of each offence compared to all others. These tariffs can then be used as multipliers for any crime count, to produce a single aggregate score reflecting both volume and severity/harm/demand.

So for example, if on a given night, the police in town A deal with reports of a burglary (score of 438), two reports of Actual Bodily Harm (2x127), a stolen car (34) and someone making threats to kill (280), and in town B (which, let's say for the sake of simplicity has an identical population size), the police record a robbery (746), an arson (439), a pickpocketing (86) and two cases of shoplifting (2x13) we can say that although both towns amassed six crime reports, crime was 'worse' (more severe, more harmful, more demanding) in town B (with a crime severity score of 1,297) than in town A (1,006).

Aggregated over a year rather than a night, and perhaps compared against previous years as well as other places, this 'two-dimensional' scoring system (incorporating both recorded crime counts and severity scores) should give us a more nuanced view of what is going on in each town, how police resources might be best allocated, and (with a little further analysis) which crime types each might prioritise and where we might find examples of good police practice or seek to make improvements.

What about the real world?

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) provide some top-line analysis along with an interactive tool⁹ that allows comparison of crime severity trends at the level of individual police forces. This tells us that:

- Between 2003 and 2011 the annual Crime Severity Score for all of England and Wales reduced in line with a steady reduction in the total volume (and population-adjusted rate) of recorded crime.
- Since 2011, the overall (unweighted) crime rate levelled off and then began to increase slightly,

² Wolfgang et al (1985).

³ Dubourg, Hamed and Thorns (2005).

⁴ Ignatans and Pease (2015).

⁵ See <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-004-x/2009001/part-partie1-eng.htm>

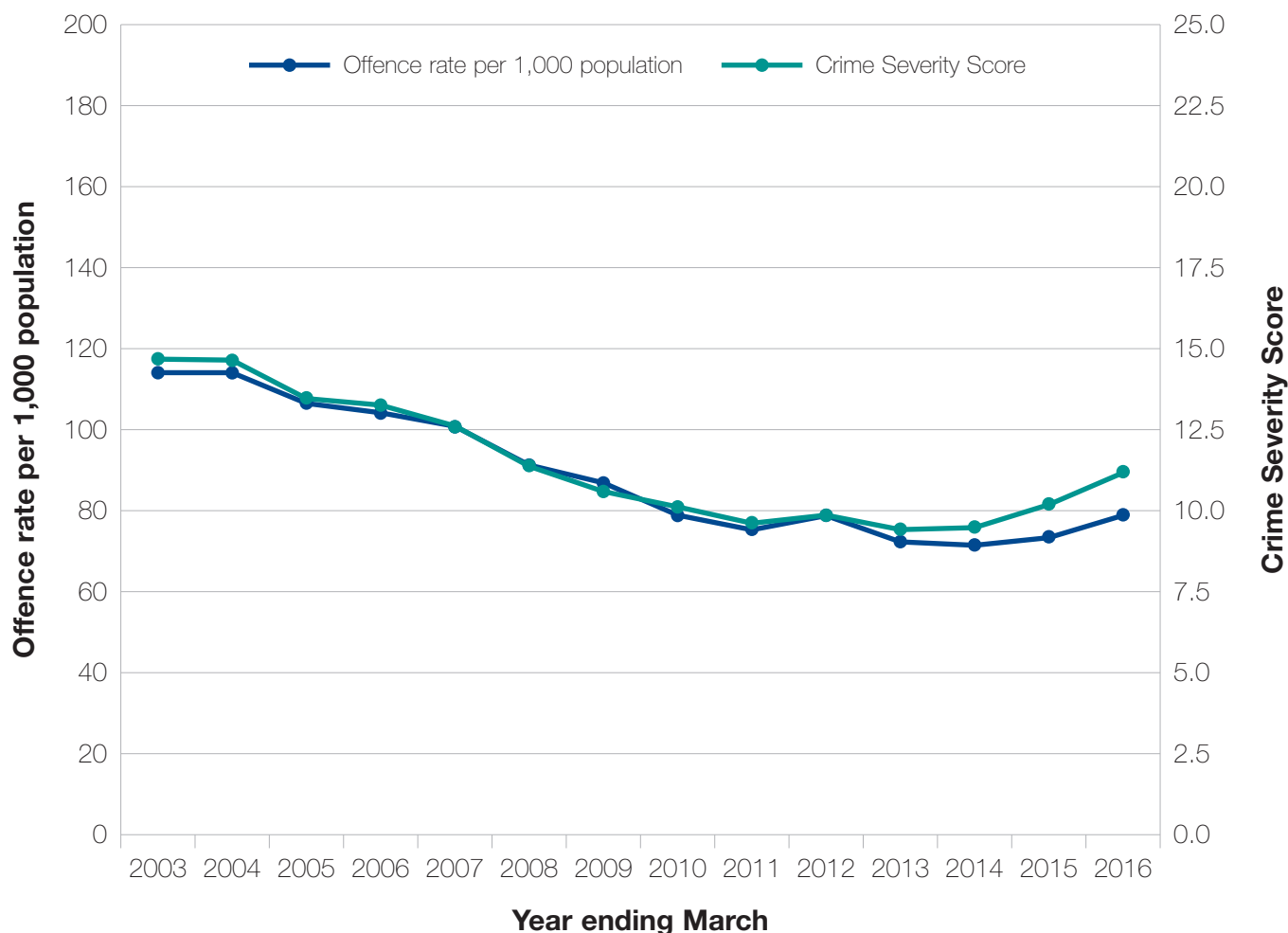
⁶ Sherman, Neyroud and Neyroud (2016).

⁷ ONS (2016a).

⁸ There is some methodological debate about the best way to derive crime category weights from sentencing data. One potential weakness of the ONS method is that it assumes that the crimes that result in a criminal sanction are typical of all crimes within that category, including those that do not. For some types of crime (some categories of fraud for example) it is possible that those cases that are prioritised for investigation and prosecution are atypically 'severe', resulting in an inflated weighting for the category as a whole. Alternative approaches, such as using the entry point tariffs stipulated in sentencing guidelines (as advocated in the Cambridge Harm Index) may negate this issue, however this may introduce other weaknesses, such as the intuitively problematic 18-fold difference in the entry point tariffs for robbery and burglary (actual sentencing data suggests that on average robberies receive a sanction 1.7 times more severe than burglaries).

⁹ Available to download from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeseverityscoredatatool>

Figure 1: Trends in police recorded crime offence rate and Crime Severity Score for England and Wales, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2016 (Source: ONS)



however the Crime Severity Score followed a slightly different pattern – remaining above and then increasing at a steeper rate than the crime rate (see Figure 1).

- This tells us that during this most recent period the ‘mix’ of recorded crime changed to include proportionally more serious (higher tariff) offences.

- Although there are some geographic variations, this crime severity ‘hockey stick’ is apparent in all police force areas – the most notable difference being in the Metropolitan Police (MPS) area where, from about 2008, the annual Crime Severity Score fell less and ‘up-ticked’ later, and to a lesser degree, than in other forces.

What’s behind the recent increase in the Crime Severity Score?

In terms of insight, the ONS leaves it more or less at that, however, by publishing its offence level

weightings, it (helpfully) makes it possible to explore further. For example, by applying the weightings to publicly available Home Office recorded crime data¹⁰, we are able to investigate what has driven the increase in crime severity between 2012/13 (when the national score was at its lowest in the period since 2002/03) and 2015/16 (the latest complete year for which data is available).

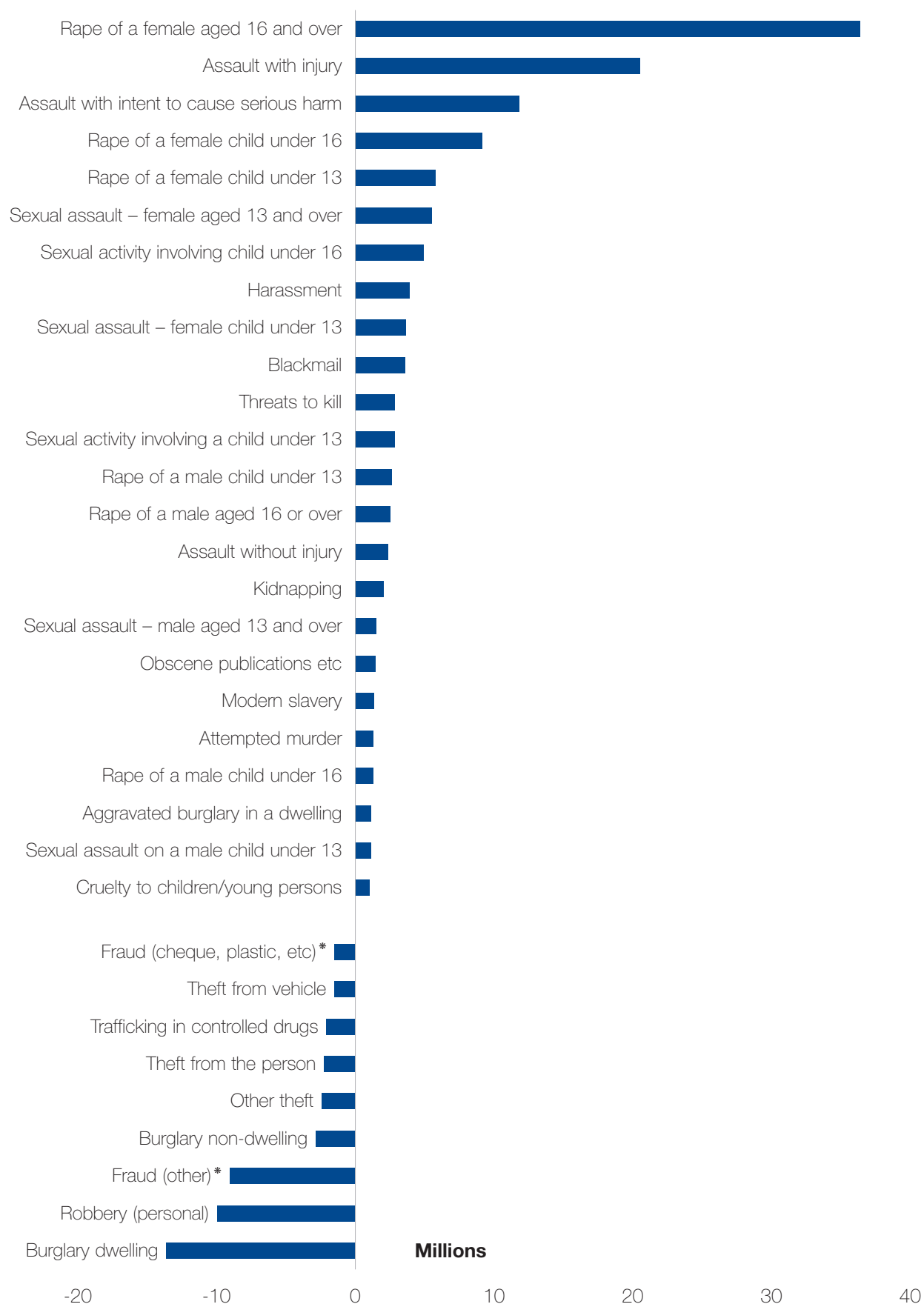
Figure 2 shows the crime types (at their finest level of classification) that have altered most, in terms of their total contribution to the annual national Crime Severity Score, between those two years.

A number of conclusions are immediately apparent, none of which are new but it is interesting nonetheless to see them encapsulated in a single chart.

- The police dealt with more high-tariff rape and sexual crime in 2015/16 than they did in

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-recorded-crime-open-data-tables>

Figure 2: Change in total Crime Severity Score 2012/13-2015/16, by offence type (England and Wales), (only offence types that increased or decreased by more than 1,000,000 points are included) ¹¹



* The apparent reduction in crime severity in the two categories of fraud shown in Figure 2 is an artefact of procedural changes in the way fraud is recorded and the availability of data. It does not reflect a real change in the number of fraud cases recorded.

¹¹ For simplicity no account has been taken of the population change during the period.

2012/13, particularly offences against women and girls.

- We know from other analysis¹² that this is the result of better recording by the police but also, and most especially, of an increase in the willingness of victims to come forward. Some, but only a minor part of this, relates to reporting of ‘non-recent’ sexual offences¹³.
- The police recorded more violent crime in 2015/16 than in 2012/13, which has resulted in a large increase in the contribution of (lower tariff, higher volume) Assault with Injury offences and (higher tariff, lower volume) Assault with Intent to Cause Serious Harm.
 - The increase in violent crime can principally be attributed to improvements in police crime recording practices, following revelations¹⁴ that the police were not recording up to one third of violent crime. Increased reporting of domestic violence to the police may also have contributed.
- There has also been an increase in the crime severity contribution from Harassment offences. This reflects a change in its definition¹⁵ to include (previously ‘non-notifiable’) offences relating to sending malicious communications and disclosing private sexual pictures and film; both are reflections of the growing role of the internet and other technologies as a medium for interpersonal crime.
 - The increase in the contribution from Blackmail, Threats to Kill and Obscene Publications offences is also likely to reflect the growing relevance of the internet over the period.
- New crimes like modern slavery have been created, and cases have been proactively identified and recorded, providing another addition to the overall severity score.

- The police are recording fewer acquisitive property crimes – the reductions in the highest tariff of these (Domestic Burglary and Personal Robbery) account for the greatest deductions from the total Crime Severity Score over the period.
 - The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)¹⁶ indicates that between 2012/13 and 2015/16 robberies fell by 26 per cent, Domestic Burglaries fell by 22 per cent and theft offences (of which burglary is a subset) fell by 24 per cent suggesting this reduction is genuine rather than an artefact of reporting or recording.
 - In the MPS the reduction in the Crime Severity Score resulting from fewer robbery and burglary offences is particularly large and offsets almost all of the increase associated with more recorded rapes and violent crime – hence the variation from the typical trend.
- The way in which fraud offences are recorded and processed changed between 2012/13 and 2015/16 which means that the Crime Severity Score associated with these, which was included in 2012/13, cannot be captured in the analysis in 2015/16¹⁷.
- Fewer drugs trafficking offences are being recorded. This is an offence most often recorded when identified by police proactivity, and the reduction in its contribution may well reflect a reduction in the police resources targeted towards this kind of criminality.

Some reflections on police recorded crime and crime severity scoring

1. *Overall, looking at police-recorded crime data through the lens of severity tells us more about what has happened to policing in recent years and less (although still something) about what has happened to crime.*

¹² ONS (2016b) p32.

¹³ In the year to March 2014 the increase in recorded sexual offences was driven by an increase in reporting of crimes that occurred more than 12 months previously, however both before and since, the increases have principally been driven by greater reporting of recent offences (ONS (2016b) p32).

¹⁴ HMIC (2014) p49.

¹⁵ ONS (2016b) p27.

¹⁶ See Appendix table A1 at

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesappendixables>

¹⁷ Fraud is included in the overall ONS Crime Severity Score for England and Wales (shown in Figure 1), but is not currently available at force level or in the Home Office crime-type data used to compile Figure 2.

Figure 2 reflects a service that has been inundated by a growing societal willingness to disclose and expose sexual abuse, both when it happens and from longer ago; a service having to admit to and correct past failings in the way it records and responds to crime; a service (and a state) searching for ways to deal with the threats posed by the internet and by globalisation (and particularly in relation to fraud, struggling to comprehend the scale of the problem or formulate an adequate response), and a service having to refocus limited resources away from some of the things it used to do like catching drug dealers. Putting aside the question of their role in bringing it about, it is fortunate for the police that the kind of crimes they used to focus on (robbery, burglary and the like) have simultaneously been coming down.

2. *Unless treated carefully and with appropriate safeguards, there is a danger that crime severity scoring could recreate the perverse incentives that contributed to the under-recording of crime in the first place.*

Quantitative performance measurement, and in particular the use of crime reduction targets¹⁸, has been implicated in the erosion of police crime recording integrity¹⁹ between the introduction of national standards in 2003, and 2013 when HMIC²⁰ and The Public Administration Select Committee²¹ (among others) began to apply greater scrutiny.

The potential risk of introducing an additional metric like the Crime Severity Score, is that it may be interpreted as suggesting a more desirable future reading against which organisations or individuals could be judged or held to account; this may in turn create incentives to (consciously or otherwise) 'meddle with the accountancy' by influencing the way crimes are recorded and classified. The particular danger with crime severity weighting is that it might focus the imperative to 'game' more intensely on higher-tariff offences (including rape and serious assaults) where the consequences for justice and victim service are potentially most acute.

The temptation to under-record or deflate the seriousness of reported crime might be alleviated,

or at least affected, by a more sophisticated view on 'what progress looks like' (ie as I discuss later, it might be more appropriate to read an increase in certain categories of severity-weighted crime as a mark of progress – which could nullify, or even invert, some of the temptation to under-record) however it is difficult to predict the behavioural consequences of new managerial practices, and precautions will need to be taken.

Three seem particularly pertinent. First, scrutiny and inspection of crime recording must be robust, particularly around the types of crime that attract the highest severity weights. Second, crime severity scoring should principally be used for 'judgement neutral' purposes, such as understanding demand and identifying priorities. Third, where 'performance' assessments are made (or might be implied) using severity weighted data, these should be based on a nuanced, narrative understanding of that data in context, which might benefit from the use of some new interpretive tools, such as those I sketch out later.

3. *In so far as it is possible to say anything about **national** police 'performance' during this period, the narrative seems a relatively positive one.*

The causes of the drop in acquisitive crime are controversial²², but the police deserve (at least marginal) credit for their efforts to reduce the most serious forms of 'volume' property crime; a greater willingness to report sexual abuse suggests improvements in trust and public confidence, improvements in violent crime recording are just that; and shifts from previous preoccupations to 'new' issues like modern slavery and online harm reflect a service recognising the need to respond to societal change. Regardless of what the police were doing wrong up to 2012/13, there are reasons to infer progress by 2015/16.

4. *So, an increase in the national crime severity score is a good thing?*

Quite possibly, yes!²³ Ironically, given that this was a period in which the police were meant to be working on a mission brief 'to cut crime'²⁴, these

¹⁸ Curtis (2015).

¹⁹ ONS (2016c) p37 (See Figure 4a).

²⁰ HMIC (2013).

²¹ PASC (2014).

²² See for example Farrell et al (2010).

²³ And I accept that communicating that message to the public might be a difficult task.

²⁴ Home Office (2010).

first scratches below the surface of the crime severity score demonstrate that the ingrained habits of seeing progress, safety and success in falling recorded crime (whether weighted or otherwise) needs to be challenged and put in the past.

There are some types of crime where we can be relatively sure that the actual amount of crime happening is fairly well reflected in police recorded crime figures²⁵; burglaries, car crime and many theft offences fall into this category. While we must remain alert to the possibility that acquisitive crime victims may be afraid (or reluctant for other reasons) to report these offences to the police – and to the potential for shoddy or under-hand recording practices (particularly where targets are involved) – for the moment, and with some caution, fewer of these on the police books can still, generally be seen as ‘a good thing’.

There are other crimes however; where police recorded crime rates should not be considered a suitable proxy for actual incidence, or reductions in them as indicators of ‘real’ trends, or of police effectiveness. These are crimes of (often sexual) abuse, for which there are significant barriers to victim reporting, both from fear of perpetrators and lack of trust in the state response (particularly when it is likely to be one person’s word against another). They are also crimes where victimisation surveys tend to be less helpful for estimating overall incidence²⁶, but which recent revelations (Rochdale, Rotherham, Savile, football abuse – to name just the most high profile) suggest are more widespread and endemic than might previously have been assumed. The most appropriate working position for the police, the state and as a society, therefore, is that; hidden abuse is prevalent, we will never know its full extent, and we can and should always try harder to find it and respond better.

So in this context, the fact that the police are recording *more* offences of this type should (generally) be seen as a *good* thing, as it is likely to

indicate more victims identified and assisted, more offenders brought to justice and prevented from doing further harm, and greater confidence among those who have been abused to come forward.

The real value of crime severity scoring is that it promotes these abuse offences from a minor caveat in the crime count (sexual offences accounted for less than three per cent of the overall unweighted crime total in 2015/16²⁷) to being a major player that cannot be overlooked within the overall quantitative picture of crime and police business (they account for more than a quarter of the Crime Severity Score – see Figure 3, overleaf).

Headline proclamations that ‘*crime is up*’ or ‘*crime is down*’ might retain some (albeit simplistic) message, while the anomalous bit of the crime count that goes up the more it is addressed, is small enough to ignore. When these crimes are given their rightful weight however, it becomes clear that we need to think about the *meaning* we attached to changes in recorded crime in a more nuanced way. As we can see clearly from Figure 2, progress pulls recorded crime but in *two directions at once* – and the Crime Severity Score amplifies this to a degree that cannot be caveated away – and so we need ways of disambiguating the net result.

Three dimensional crime measurement

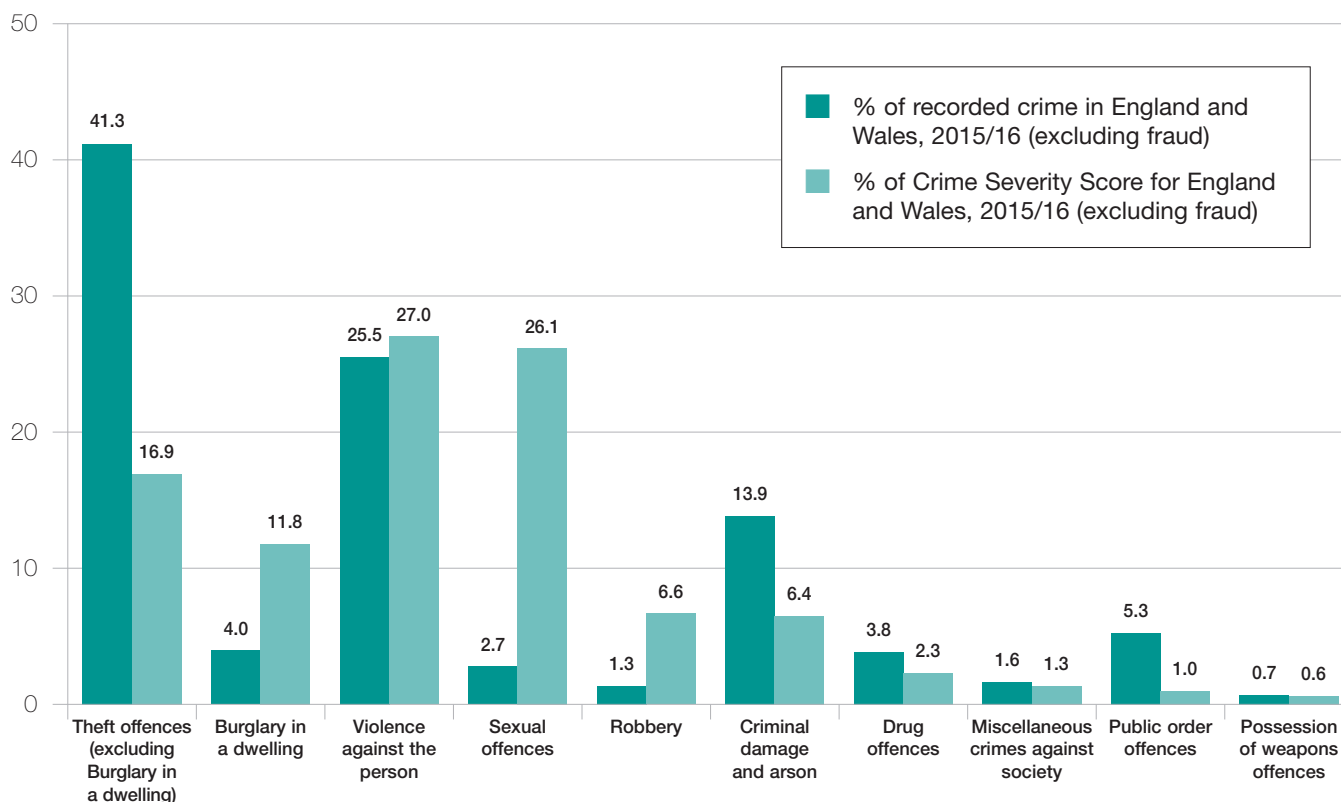
As the above makes clear, to make sense of aggregated Crime Severity Scores, we need to undertake some form of *disaggregation*. Returning to the earlier analogy, to judge the state of your diet, it would be good to know what proportion of your calories comes from fatty and sugary food and what part from fruit and vegetables. Similarly, to understand crime severity we need to separate out at least two component sub-scores; one for the types of recorded crime we want to see coming down and one for the crimes we want to see feature more often within the official police workload (as an indicator of more assistance provided, offending addressed and confidence improved) – we might even consider expressing these two scores as a ratio and tracking how this changes

²⁵ Or else, where they go unreported, the imperative for the police (or others) to respond on behalf of the victim or society is weak or non-existent.

²⁶ A CSEW module (ONS (2016d) p6.) found that seven per cent of adults reported being sexually abused in childhood; however no attempt has been made to extrapolate a figure for offences per year. Similarly, CSEW questions about intimate violence (ONS (2016b) p30.) are reported in terms of numbers of victims not offences, and there is considerable methodological debate (see Walby, Towers and Francis (2015)) about how CSEW data might be used to estimate the true incidence of domestic violence.

²⁷ Excluding fraud.

Figure 3: Proportion (%) of recorded crime and proportion (%) of Crime Severity Score by Offence Group (excluding fraud and with Burglary in a Dwelling separated from all other Theft offences) – 2015/16



over time²⁸. But unfortunately it's not as simple as just splitting out existing categories like theft and sexual offences, as a closer examination of violent crime illustrates.

Violence is the third big contributor to the severity score (accounting for 27 per cent of the 2015/16 total for England and Wales, compared with 26 per cent for sexual offences and 29 per cent for theft offences²⁹), but within the violence category there are some sub sets of offences where we would legitimately like to see recorded crime/crime severity fall – town centre, alcohol-related fights on a Saturday night for example – while there are others we should treat more like sexual abuse; that take place in private, where there are significant barriers to reporting, much more happens than the police are told about, and for which

we cannot be sure (particularly at a the police force level or below) if a change in recorded crime reflects a change in incidence, willingness to report or recording practices. Domestic violence, cruelty to children or assaults on patients in care homes would all come into this category.

I don't intend to give definitive criteria for partitioning the violent (or any other) crime category here, but it's not inconceivable that the existing feature flags and other variables held within police crime data³⁰ might be used to create a workable division between that part of crime we should legitimately try and 'manage down', and that which the state should primarily seek to identify, respond to appropriately and try to prevent from happening again (and I'll come to repeat victimisation shortly).

So, the first severity score split I'd like to suggest, is into two non-traditional crime categories which I'll provisionally call '*abuse crime*' and '*reduce crime*' (and I'm open to the possibility of a third '*other*' category, for offences that may be neither³¹) and

²⁸ Unweighted crime counts for these two theoretical crime categories may also be of some limited value, however using severity multipliers would help ensure appropriate emphasis was given to each part in overall thinking about police work and priorities, while also reflecting the relative severity of the different crime types *within* each of the two broad categories. A ratio may have the benefit of expressing these two dimensions of police business (crime reduction and dealing with abuse) as a single variable, while emphasising the links between them – for example successfully preventing appropriate forms of crime should reduce demand and free-up resources to deal with, and proactively identify hidden abuse. Progress on both components of this 'virtuous spiral' would move the ratio in the same direction and it might therefore provide a useful indicator of overall 'progress'.

²⁹ Excluding robbery; 35 per cent when included, (again fraud is excluded from the total here).

³⁰ Given the intricacy of the divisions I suggest, and differences between police force crime recording systems and practices, it would only probably be feasible for this analysis to be developed by force level analysts, rather than compiled nationally.

³¹ Which might include some categories of fraud for example.

there is scope for discussion and debate about exactly how these categories should be constructed – which may, incidentally, help clarify and articulate the police mission across the contrasting circumstances in which they are called to provide a law enforcement response. But there are also other ways to cut the weighted data that could be instructive, and I'll briefly mention two more.

First, and related to the above, a distinction has increasingly been made between 'patent' demand on the police – that which comes in the form of crimes (and other incidents) reported by the public, and 'latent' demand – crimes and harms, often linked to the type of abuse outlined above, that are not reported, but nonetheless form a critical part of the police mission to find, investigate and deal with. There are concerns that with fewer resources, the police are becoming increasingly occupied with responding to 'patent' demand rather than working proactively to reduce it, and that they have less capacity to seek out 'latent' demand and harm. As the police generally record the route through which an offence comes to their attention, it seems worth exploring whether it is possible to distinguish that part of the Crime Severity Score that relates to proactively identified, (previously) 'latent' crime, from that part which is 'patently' reported. Of course one way of tackling 'latent' demand is to improve public (or more specifically victim) confidence so that it becomes 'patent' – and thus the 'patent' side of the equation would have to be interpreted carefully, perhaps in conjunction with the 'abuse'/'reduce' division suggested above.

Second, crime victimisation is known to be disproportionately experienced by a relatively small cohort of repeat-victims, and it is highly probable (and well worth verifying empirically) that crime severity – and the harm and demand for which it is a proxy – is even more highly concentrated within a subset of vulnerable individuals. Part of the police (and broader public service) response to the emergence of harm and abuse in its myriad forms, as a priority issue, has been to increase the focus on managing risk, preventing recurrence and reducing harm, through case-level intervention mechanisms such as MARAC, MASH, MAPPA and a broader concern for 'Safeguarding'. In this context it would seem instructive and beneficial to identify and monitor the portion of the crime severity total that relates to repeat victimisation (as defined, for instance, as the second or subsequent crime

committed against an individual within a twelve month period)³². Again, there may be value in combining this with the 'abuse'/'reduce' division; we might, for instance, view an increase in the 'abuse crime' severity score relating to initial (ie non-repeat) crime reports as a positive development (suggesting that more victims are coming forward), however we may want to question the methods being used if we do not see gradual reductions in the severity score relating to repeat-abuse crime³³ over time.

Conclusions

As a second dimension of crime accountancy, severity scoring represents a valuable step towards allowing a more sophisticated understanding of the changing nature – and perhaps also the overall 'weight' – of the police workload (or at least the crime-related part of it), and, to a more limited extent, of crime and harm in society. While judgements about police effectiveness and 'performance' must always be made carefully and with controls and safeguards in place, the Crime Severity Score is of value, firstly, for giving crimes of abuse a more central position within the overall quantitative crime picture and secondly, as a consequence of this, for forcing us to reconsider the meanings we attach to changes in police recorded crime. Better policing might push component parts of the Crime Severity Score, (and recorded crime counts) up, it may pull them down, it may do neither, or it may do both at the same time, and we therefore need additional tools for interrogating the aggregated totals.

Herein lies the riddle of the Crime Severity Score; its potential lies in allowing different categories of recorded crime to be aggregated together while preserving some element of their difference, but to be interpreted meaningfully, the total this produces then requires some degree of dissection and *disaggregation*. As I've argued here, a set of non-traditional cleavages in the weighted data, such as between 'abuse' and 'reduce' crime, 'patent' and 'latent' police work and between 'initial' and 'repeat' victim crimes, would seem to provide valuable 'mid-level' frames with which to attempt this, and to construct a more three-dimensional understanding of crime, police practice and the relationships between the two.

³² An interesting alternative might be to identify and monitor victims who hit a threshold in their *personal* crime severity score within a year, regardless of the number of offences this relates to.

³³ Perhaps as a rate per initial victim.

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³⁴ All links active as of 22 March 2017.

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