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CRIME STATISTICS AS CONSTRUCTS: THE CASE OF SWEDISH RAPE STATISTICS

ABSTRACT. Using Swedish rape statistics as a focus, this article aims to empirically describe the way in which different factors affect official crime statistics produced at the national level. It is argued that cross-national comparisons of crime levels are extremely hazardous when based on official crime statistics, since the construction rules vary widely. International comparisons of crime levels should as a rule be confined to findings of international victim surveys. The example of rape statistics in Sweden – about three times higher when compared to other countries in the European Sourcebook – is used to explain what factors can influence statistics. Statistical, legal and substantive factors are to be taken into account. The author shows that changes in statistical routines, the legal definition of rape and changes over time all influence the statistics in a substantive way. This article indicates the great extent to which crime statistics are a construct, whose appearance is very sensitive to the rules applied in the process of construction. In order to employ statistics appropriately, a thorough knowledge of the principles guiding this process is therefore essential.

KEY WORDS: crime statistics, rape

In the collation of European crime statistics initiated by the Council of Europe, Sweden presents the highest number of police registered rape offences by some considerable extent. In 1996, the average number of rape offences registered in 35 European countries was 6.6 per 100,000 of population (see Table I), whilst Sweden presented a level of 18.2 per 100,000 – almost three times the average. The question is whether this means that Swedish women are on average three times as likely to be raped as women in the rest of Europe.

The answer is no. A comparison of the crime statistics from the 35 countries does not justify such a conclusion since the statistical collection and collation procedures employed in the various countries differ too greatly. Whilst comparisons of this kind do not require that we have *complete* knowledge of all the details affecting the statistics produced in the various countries, it is essential to have a good grasp of the most important factors.

Using Sweden as a focus for the discussion, this article aims to describe the way in which different factors can affect the crime statistics

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TABLE I

European and Swedish offence statistics : Recorded rape offences, 1990–1996. Per 100,000 of population.

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Mean	6.0	6.2	6.1	6.5	6.5	6.8	6.6
Median	6.3	6.3	5.2	6.2	6.1	6.5	6.0
Minimum	0.4	1.2	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.3
Maximum	16.5	17.0	19.5	24.7	20.6	19.3	18.2
Sweden	16.5	17.0	19.5	24.7	20.6	19.3	18.2
Number of countries	31	33	33	35	36	35	35

Source: Council of Europe (1999, Table 1.B.1.5)

produced at the national level. Our focus is exclusively methodological and should not be seen as an attempt to explain away high Swedish rape figures. As is pointed out in the article's conclusion, there is no way of ruling out the possibility that the level of rape offences in Sweden does in fact lie above the European average. Since Sweden has a well-developed system for gathering and processing statistics, however, it has been possible to simulate¹ a number of the effects that result from the application of different rules in the collection of statistics, and it is this simulation that provides the basis for this article. There are essentially three types of factors that determine the outcome of crime statistics: statistical factors; legal factors; and substantive factors. The significance of these factors for rape statistics will now be discussed, one factor at a time.

STATISTICAL FACTORS

At Which Point Are the Data Collected?

Crime statistics data can be collected at the time when the offence is first reported, or later on. In Sweden, crime data are collected when the offence in question is first reported, at which point the rubric under which the offence should be classified may be rather unclear. The version of events provided by the individual reporting the offence functions as the exclusive basis for classification of the reported offence, and in the case of rape it can be difficult to know exactly what

¹The simulation was planned and carried out in June 1999 by Gabriella Bremberg and Mats Sonefors.