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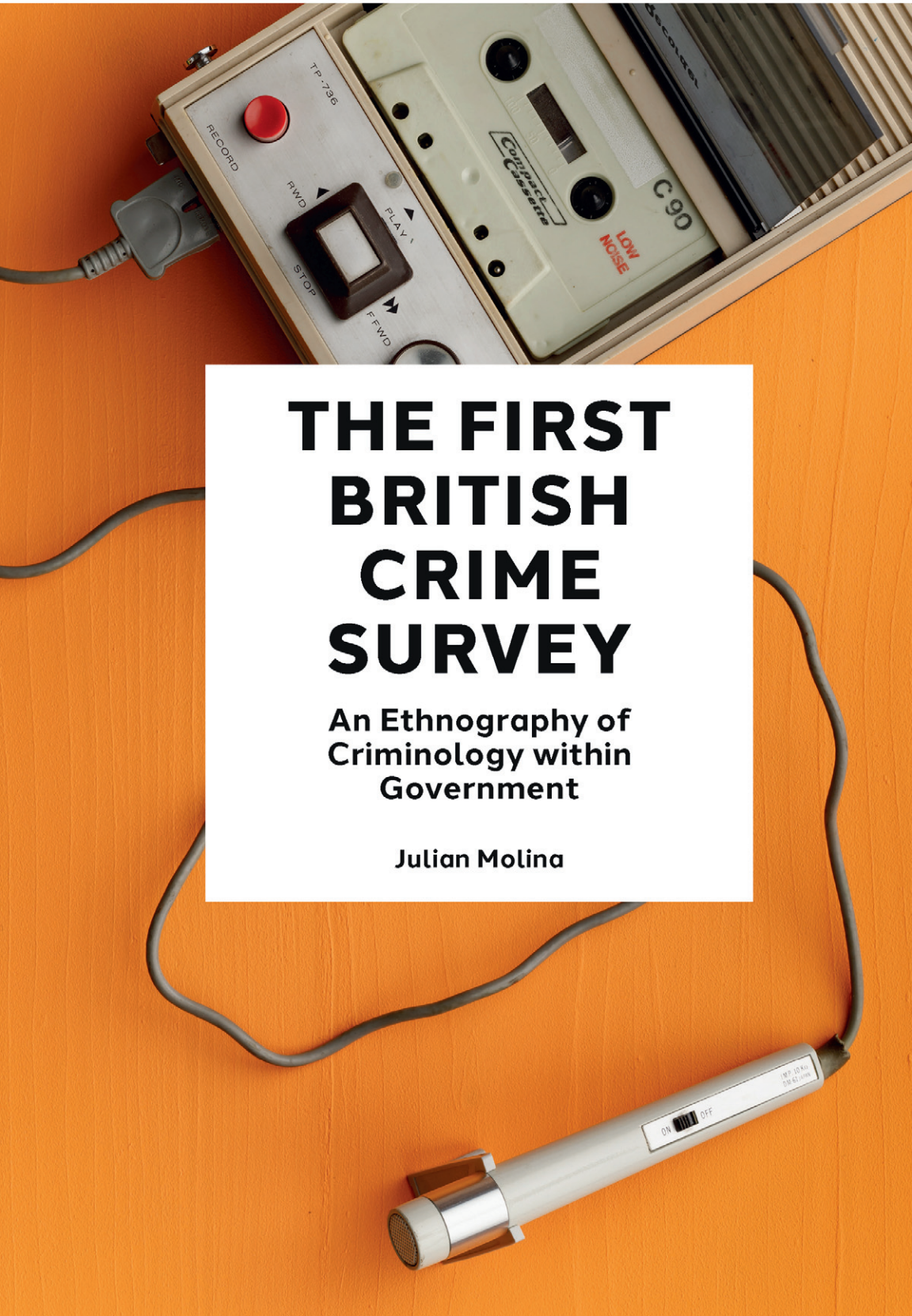

THE FIRST BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

An Ethnography of Criminology within Government

Julian Molina

The First British Crime Survey

Emerald Advances in Historical Criminology

Series Editors: David Churchill and Christopher Mullins

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The First British Crime Survey: An Ethnography of Criminology within Government

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80382-276-1 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-275-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-277-8 (Epub)

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List of Acronyms

BCA	Black Cultural Archives
BCS	British Crime Survey
C1	Home Office Criminal Department
CDRC	Criminal Department Research Committee
CPPU	Crime Policy Planning Unit
CSEW	Crime Survey for England and Wales
CSO	Central Statistical Office
F3	Home Office Police Department
GHS	General Household Survey
GLC	Greater London Council
GSR	Government Social Research
GSS	Government Statistical Service
HMIC	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
HORU	Home Office Research Unit
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
MPD	Metropolitan Police Department
NCS	National Crime Survey
NRS	National Records of Scotland
OPCS	Office of Population Censuses and Surveys
RPU	Research and Planning Unit
S1	Home Office Statistical Division 1
S2	Home Office Statistical Division 2
S3	Home Office Statistical Division 3
SCPR	Social and Community Planning Research
SD	Home Office's Statistical Department
SHHD	Scottish Home and Health Department
TNA	The National Archives

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my thanks for the generosity of my unnamed interviewees who kindly shared their memories of working on the British Crime Survey. The book has benefited from the encouragement of Vanesa Fuertes, Lukas Griesl, Matthieu de Castelbajac, Rebecca Shortt, Elaine Wedlock and Tomas Percival. I would like to thank Pamela Cox for her early support for this project and Patricia Castellano for her assistance at the National Records for Scotland. I want to thank the friends, colleagues and teachers at Goldsmiths, University of London, the University of Warwick and the University of the West of Scotland, each of whom have helped shape this book. I would like to thank my former colleagues in the Civil Service, without whom I would not have understood which way was up or down. I would like to thank the Emerald editorial team for their professionalism, Dave Churchill for his thoughtful feedback, and the anonymous reviewers of my proposal. Additional thanks go to the staff at The National Archives, the British Library, the Black Cultural Archives, the Institute of Criminology, Cambridge, and the London Metropolitan Archives. This research was made possible through the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant Fund, project code SG2122\210910 and an Economic and Social Research Council Doctoral Studentship.

Special thanks to Tom Percival and Sasha Bergstrom-Katz, for giving me a place to stay and the provocation to get this book going. I would like to thank my parents, Nicola and Edmundo, for their lively faith. This book was only possible due to the love and grace of Fidelma Hanrahan.

Image 1. Home Office Folders in the National Archives. Photograph by Author.

Introduction

Criminal justice systems seem replete with data. Recent years have seen growing concerns about biased and discriminatory datasets in criminal justice systems and legal challenges to those infrastructures use to collect and process data. Meanwhile, media platforms regularly highlight systemic injustices and individual crimes, spotlighting victims, policing scandals and changing crime levels. As the politics of 'law and order' continues to dominate crime policy across much of the world, we should not overlook the instrumental role of data infrastructures in creating shared sensibilities about crime and justice. Indeed, at this conjuncture, it has become essentially important to understand the overlapping histories of 'law and order' politics and its data infrastructures. Questions about how these infrastructures were designed and what they were designed to do can elucidate critical features of contemporary crime policy and the administration of justice.

During the summer of 2021, following the election of Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales, then Home Secretary, Priti Patel, unveiled her government's *Beating Crime Plan*. The plan's strapline of 'Fewer victims, peaceful neighbourhoods, safer country' outlined the government's commitment to be on the side of a 'law-abiding majority' and the objective to decrease crime levels. Before setting out her government's actions to achieve these aims, the plan began by stating the problem. While overall crime in the country has been falling over the last decade, the plan baldly stated that 'this is not a reality that is recognised by the public' (HM Government, 2021). In illustrating the scale of the national crime problem, the plan included a line chart of crime estimates from December 1981 to March 2021. The line seemed to decrease from a peak in the mid-1990s. If we glance at the chart, it appears that the total volume of crime in England and Wales looked to be the lowest on record in March 2021. The government's plan contrasted an overall decrease in crime levels with increasing homicides, assaults and anti-social behaviour. The possibility of developing such historical narratives about a declining volume of crime, separate from those recorded by the police, derives from data collected through the British Crime Survey, now the Crime Survey for England and Wales. It is a legacy survey initiated in the early 1980s, which presents a reality of crime that successive governments have to recognise and operation within.

In April 1983, a month after the publication of the first British Crime Survey report, Home Secretary William Whitelaw delivered a speech to Lincolnshire

The First British Crime Survey, 1–16

doi:10.1108/978-1-80382-275-420231001

Magistrates. 'No Home Secretary', he said, 'could fail to be aware of the degree of public concern about the level of crime. We must never underestimate its impact. Indeed, the recently published British Crime Survey has confirmed that a large amount of crime goes unreported and unrecorded'.[1] That same spring, Home Office officials briefed then Minister of State for Health Kenneth Clarke about the survey before his appearance on BBC's *Question Time*. When questioned about the rationale for the survey, officials wrote: 'The line to take on questions about it would be that it is important to know as much as possible about crime and its extent and the Government will be considering carefully the Survey's findings and public reaction to them'.[2]

The British Crime Survey authors have been some of the most cited scholars in the field of criminology, and the use of British Crime Survey data has become a 'rite of passage' for graduate students.[3] It is fair to say that the British Crime Survey has substantial ramifications on public and policy debates about crime, to the point where we could call it the *hegemonic* data source about crime. Contemporary public debates about crime seem to be haunted by the legacy of the survey's emergence from academic and policy debates in the 1970s and early 1980s (Fiddler et al., 2021). It was an administrative criminological project that one of the lead Home Office researchers and report authors, Pat Mayhew (2015), has called an 'empirical breakthrough'. One aspect of the breakthrough involved supplanting the predominance of Home Office statistics in public debate, many of which had been collected and published since 1857 (Maurice, 1985, p. 70.6). Paradoxically, we also need to understand how, although the survey persists, at the time of the first survey, Home Office officials largely viewed it as an 'occasional research survey, not as a regular mechanism for tracking victimisation'.[4]

This book examines how the first survey emerged through the work of government researchers and statisticians, partly due to wide-scale changes in the status of Home Office statistical services, concern about the rising levels of crimes and the growing influence of the situational crime prevention agenda. We are in a context where reality seems to be determined through public sentiments and feelings, where subjects are routinely surveilled, and police statistics continue to generate public controversy (Davies, 2018; Grierson, 2020; Mbembe, 2017). The book intends to contribute to a growing scholarship on histories of data, with two recent examples being offered by Bouk (2015) and Radin (2017). Turning to the origins of a 40-year-old government survey provides a historical case to consider how statistics are used to make sense of crime and to tell a story about the relationship between criminology in government. This allows us to consider the production of analytical realities built on expertise and techniques from the social sciences.

The idea for this book emerged when I planned to leave the Civil Service in the spring of 2021, where I had worked as a Government Social Research (GSR)

[1]Home Secretary's Speech to the Lincolnshire Magistrates on 29 April 1983, TNA HO 496/12.
[2]BBC TV 'Question Time' Briefing for Mr Clarke, Crime, TNA HO 496/12.
[3]Interview with academic criminologist, August 2022.
[4]See footnote 3.

professional for 40 months. As a story about government research, it approaches a dataset I regularly used within non-departmental offices of the Ministry of Justice so as to understand the history of this dataset and the practicalities of government research work. The starting point for this book hinges on both my memory of being part of a community and my ignorance of this infrastructure's history. In a simple sense, I did not need to understand the dataset's history to use these datasets in government. For government and academic researchers focussed on crime and justice, using crime survey data is a rite of passage, and we are approaching 40 years since its first instantiation while new data infrastructures are emerging, beyond the Crime Survey, that focusses on crime and criminal justice. During my time in the Civil Service, I began to see the emergence of data projects that aim to incorporate 'justice system' datasets and administrative negotiations over their scope, scale and usage. In this book, I combine these observations to offer a case study in establishing new data infrastructures and the cultures of interaction within the government research communities, as informed by my experience working within them.

In doing so, I aim to offer a modest intervention in contemporary debates about 'law and order' politics by focussing on the emergence of one of its infrastructures.[5] This intervention has a few targets, though its 'policy implications' are intentionally slippery (Murji, 2022). I aim to contribute to scholarship about crime statistics *and* the relationship between government research and academic criminology, by reflecting on what I witnessed with an empathetic and critical eye without prioritising the personal in ethnography. Instead, the book looks to a historical case and its archival records as resources to explicate the singularities of government research work.[6] These features bring to view professional rivalries and ugly feelings, methodological technicalities and demonstration practices, interactions about paperwork and race, bureaucracies and persuasion, and small working groups of officials and experts. The book principally focusses on the worksite practices of groups of Home Office administrative criminologists, with each chapter describing a stage of how they prepared the first British Crime Survey. I have organised this book as a procedural account to explicate *recognisable* features of government research work. The book follows other 'shop floor problems' studies by focussing on the ordinary practicalities of managing tasks in

[5]I take the phrase 'ordinary infrastructure of government' from one of my interviewees while also approaching infrastructures, whether data or survey infrastructures, through critical scholarship about the politics, poetics and promise of infrastructures (Larkin, 2013; Anand et al., 2018), while seeking to bring this scholarship into dialogue with research on the history of social science, 'work practices' and logisticality.

[6]In this sense, the book takes Katherine Verdery's magnificent *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police* File (2018) as a key source of inspiration. Verdery's exploration of surveillance under Eastern European communism offers countless points of reference with which to think through how to combine varied 'data source', how to think through questions of anthropological naivete, memorialisation and deception in fieldwork, doing research under conditions of surveillance, and the use of state documents to offer sites of reflection on 'the personal'.

workplace settings (Anderson and Sharrock, 2018). In doing so, the book reflects on the historical significance of these practices used to produce criminological knowledge and crime data. The book aims to understand the relationship between administrative practices, criminological reason and epistemological boundaries.

In moving from past to present, from the personal to the archival, through examining the politics and administration of crime statistics, the book reflects on the legacies and affordances of the historical present (Churchill et al., 2021). A constant feature of 'law and order' politics is the use of statistics to claim that crime is an increasing danger to social order. The first British Crime Survey report began by reflecting on that topic by claiming that newspaper headlines pro-claiming that 'crime figures soar' were, likely, illusory. In the 1980s, government officials would use the British Crime Survey to claim that crime was not soaring and that rising levels were a product of police practices. Looking back at the Home Office's efforts on the first British Crime Survey, the project to get the survey approved could be said to demonstrate a shared confidence in the promise of liberal rationality, expertise and evidence, to undertake a significant data-led initiative and claim to represent a shared social reality. While we may have long past the 'liberal hour' in criminal justice, in the first pages of the first report, the authors nod to the legacy of Jeremy Bentham and his notion of crime being a '"political barometer" of the moral health of the country'.[7] Statistics are a rationale device for sense-making practices, and it is a truism to say that public debates about crime are replete with statistical measures. These may be statistics representing the national trends in crime, whether about specific or general offences, victims or offenders. By approaching statistics as sense-making devices, we need to consider how, as Verran (2018) has described, numbers are used, transferred, cited, and perform complex phenomena in public policy, governance and culture.

Moreover, just as there is no shortage of counting practices used in public debates about crime, the introduction of a British Crime Survey by the Home Office reflected a particular kind of intervention in 'law and order' politics that identified an emergent political figure of the victim and, in turn, acknowledged the growing importance of the victims' rights movement during the 1970s (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2021). The survey introduced a new official method of measuring crime in Britain, which displaced the police from being the principal producers of crime statistics. Instead, it foregrounded how victims frequently dealt with criminal acts themselves without recourse to 'justice responses'. This was a 'law and order' politics embedded in a rationalist tradition of social science and

[7]Explicit reference is made to Jeremy Bentham, and the historical tradition of gathering information about crime, in the introduction to the *British Crime Survey: First Report*. As the authors state: 'Several statistics have done service as indicators of crime. Court records have been maintained since medieval times and it is to these that people naturally turned in the past for information about crime. Jeremy Bentham, for example, stressed in 1778 the need for centrally gathered court statistics for use as a kind of 'political barometer' indicating the moral health of the nation' (Hough and Mayhew, 1983a, p. 1). For further reflection on this 'liberal hour', see: Rock, 2019.

measurement, liberal by design and orientation, emphasising citizens' responses to crime, where the victim was a rational actor calculating whether to report criminal incidents to the police. This 'law and order' politics prioritised the enumeration of certain crimes, namely burglary and property crime, and used a specific model for typifying, profiling and accounting for crime. At the same time, for Sandra Walklate (2015), as the first British Crime Survey report produced new insights into crime, it was communicated to 'downplay the problem of crime' rather than to reveal its reality, and in turn, to lessen public fears of becoming a victim. In my interviews, I repeatedly heard that the survey allayed public panic about the revelation of a substantial amount of hidden crime by pointing out that the most prevalent crime not reported to the police was the theft of milk bottles from doorsteps.[8] The publicity around the report, in short, was carefully managed by Home Office officials to intervene in public debates and manage public perceptions of crime.

Measuring the 'Dark Figure of Crime'

Following the Home Office's efforts to enumerate the 'true scale' of crime allows for an extended examination of working on the practical contingencies of quantifying the 'dark figure of crime'.[9] This was a central metaphor running throughout Home Office officials' correspondence about the survey. The head of the Statistical Department noted that the 'hidden economy' or 'dark figure of crime' was estimated to be around four times larger than police-recorded crime statistics (Maurice, 1985, p. 70.6). In the late 1970s, early proponents of the crime survey claimed it would educate the British public about the nature of crime, uncover the 'dark figure of crime' and offer valuable insights for criminal justice policymaking. Moreover, while the concept of a 'dark figure of crime' seems to have been a central idea behind the survey, the Home Office's rationale for the project was more complicated than it first appears. As much as the project was concerned with shining light on this 'dark figure', there were other administrative and research agendas at work. Home Office officials have explained that the survey enabled its Research Unit to gain increased prominence in shaping Home Office policy and enable a wider recognition of the limitation of the police in

[8]In the words of one interview, the Home Office toned down their reporting of the survey findings with gestures to the effect of: 'well, we said that most of the crimes that were not reported to the Police were theft of milk bottles from doorsteps and things, it's all very petty stuff, nothing to concern us'. Although the first survey identified that the 'commonest crime' identified by the survey was the theft of milk bottles, these crimes were not counted as property offences in the first survey (Mayhew, 1985). Further comments to this effect can be found in an edited collection reflecting on 'policy research', authored by two Home Office Research Unit officials, noting that the survey would provide evidence of the 'commonplace' nature of crime (Clarke and Cornish, 1983).

[9]Clive Emsley has shown how the collection and publication of national crime statistics 'gave substance to the idea that crime was a national problem' (Emsley, 2007, p. 133). See also Hand, 2020.

crime policy. If the police were unaware of most crimes, there should be alternative strategies and policies. One of the preferred strategies emerging from the Research Unit during the late 1970s on crime prevention. This agenda emphasised the measures that private individuals and households could take to protect themselves against crimes, such as target-hardening measures and surveillance technologies. As two of the protagonists in the survey, Pat Mayhew and Mike Hough, have stated, the survey, it was hoped, 'would strengthen the case for more work on preventing crime as it ordinarily impacted on the public, rather than as the police knew it' (Mayhew and Hough, 2013, p. 24).

How the 'dark figure of crime' metaphor emerged in British criminology and the Home Office has been carefully traced by de Castelbajac, who has detailed how this concept appeared in criminological scholarship in the late 1960s and 1970s and was subsequently translated into an operational concern for officials at the centre of government (de Castelbajac, 2014). This 'dark figure' metaphor had several functions. One of these functions was to enable the Home Office to enumerate a new reality for crime. The Home Office began developing this new model of crime statistics in the early 1970s, initially by sponsoring and supporting the development of victimisation survey project in London (Sparks et al., 1977). The Sparks, Genn and Dodd survey set out an interactionist model for the chain of links between a criminal incident and a police-recorded crime statistic.[10] By introducing this analytical model of victim behaviours, crime reports and recording, this model mapped out a new chain of sequences for producing criminal statistics. This model drew upon academic criminological accounts of police work and operationalised drawing on social constructionist accounts of crime statistics to justify the introduction of a new methodology to account for crime incidents. This innovation introduced a new understanding of the social basis for statistics, shifting attention away from organisational processes that required police definition and recording of criminal incidents, and instead introduced sampling methods to focus on the victim of crime, rather than prioritise either the perpetrator or the offence. In doing so, the methodological innovation of crime surveys introduced a new model that linked criminal incidents with police statistics, through by introducing new procedures that involved survey forms, sampling frames, weighting techniques, government researchers, surveyors and civil servants.

[10]There are different versions of this model: The authors of *Surveying Victims* (1977), Richard Sparks, Hazel Genn and David Dodd offer a 'deliberately oversimplified' diagram to depict what they refer to as the 'processes of societal reaction to crime and recording by police'. The steps move from 'Act or Situation' to (1) Perception, (2) Definition, (3) Reporting, (4) (redefinition) and (5) Recording, then to 'Recorded Crime Known to the Police' (Sparks et al., 1977, p. 6). John Lea and Jock Young offer a model of the stages through 'which an act deemed illegal reaches the pages of the annual criminal statistics': (1) acts known to the public; (2) crimes known to the public; (3) crimes reported to the police; (4) crimes registered by the police; (5) crimes deemed so by the courts and (6) the 'official' statistics (Lea and Young, 1993, p. 14).

At the time of the survey's origins, official crime statistics had shown an annual increase in the volume of crime since the mid-1950s. The total number of recorded offences increased from 1.5 million in 1969 to 2.5 million in 1979. By 1979, the number of recorded burglary offences had reached more than 500,000 for four consecutive years (Home Office, 2016). Though, the context for the survey's emergence is also tied to long-standing concerns in the Home Office about the value of police statistics. An area that merits further attention is how the British Crime Survey and the Home Office Research Unit challenged the pre-eminence of police-recorded crime statistics and became a matter of concern for the Home Office Statistical Department. Although we can tell a story about crime through the application, interpretation and analysis of statistics, this book suggests a shift in perspective to look at how this 'dark figure' was written about, reasoned, strategised, planned and its anticipated effects. Home Office officials' work to prepare the first survey report responded to the concerns of politicians, policymakers and civil servants about these statistics. Protagonists in this circus have outlined the Home Office's objectives and their roles in developing the survey and indicated that varied agendas were circulating in the Home Office before the launch of the survey (Mayhew and Hough, 1992; Hough and Maxfield, 2007).

Elsewhere, historians have explored the importance of working partnerships between academic criminologists and Home Office officials and how the survey emerged as a political response to widespread concerns over crime (Loader, 2006; Oyanedel, 2019). Furthermore, while the first British Crime Survey brought innovations in criminological methodology, it also reproduced approaches used in other national and local victimisation surveys. Crime victimisation surveys were responsible for discovering 'hidden crime' during the 1930s and 1940s in Scandinavia, the United States and the Netherlands (de Castelbajac, 2013; Kivivuori, 2011). Victimisation surveys were subsequently undertaken in the United States, Netherlands and cities in the United Kingdom during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, by the time the Home Office initiated the survey in 1981, Home Office officials knew what they would likely find when enumerating the 'dark figure of crime'. Simply put, more crime occurred within society than police statistics suggested.

From Administrative Criminology to the Crime Survey Circus

By focussing on how Home Office officials developed a new method for counting crime, the book examines the administrative origins as a site of dissent, dispute and innovations in formulating new knowledge about crime. The book is closely focussed on the Home Office as a site of *administrative criminology*, but without offering a cautionary tale about false faith in statistics to solve social problems (Young, 1986). For critics in British criminological communities, such as Jock Young, administrative criminology ignored the *social circumstances* which determined crime, lacked interest in the origins of crime, overly emphasised 'choice' in criminal acts and advocated policing through deterrence (Young, 1986, p. 10). Administrative criminology was a code word used by Young and others to

refer to government criminological research and the Situational Crime Prevention research developed in the Home Office during the 1980s (Hough, 2014).[11] This book offers a different starting point to study this subfield of criminology by focussing on some practices attended to in the course of *doing criminology within government*. It offers the notion of the *circus* to understand these practices, not in the derogatory sense of chaotic, but to explore the coordinated skills, practices and organisational work of its practitioners. By taking this approach, the book contributes to burgeoning scholarship in historical criminology with this focus on administrative practices, statistics as work products, and questions of race and politics of statistics and quantitative measures (Martin and Lynch, 2009; Gephart Jr., 1988, 2006, Gephart Jr. and Smith, 2009; Gephart Jr. and Saylors, 2019). It takes up recent calls for a renewed focus on race by studying 'habits of thought' in administrative criminological work (Phillips et al., 2020; Ray, 2019). Furthermore, the book follows scholarship focussed on the 'social life of methods' in the social sciences, focussed on methods of capturing, enumerating and articulating social phenomenon pioneered by social scientists, states, polling companies and market research firms (Savage, 2010, 2013). Though, with the emergence of artificial intelligence, big data and 'real-time' data analytics, telling the story of a representative crime survey from the 1980s may seem vaguely quaint. This book does not critique the underlying politics or practices to propose a new basis for crime statistics but instead proposes to illustrate the work of a 'crime survey circus'. As such, the book offers a history of a criminological object, the British Crime Survey, by focussing on how it emerged through the work of Home Office researchers and a network of civil servants, academic criminologists, survey firms, international criminal justice experts, social science researchers and journalists.

During the early 1980s, significant efforts were made by Home Office officials, academics in England, the United States, Netherlands and commercial social research agencies, to produce a new measure to enumerate crime in Britain. This occurred at the same time as the Home Office's Statistical Department and its *Criminal Statistics* publications were subject to budgetary cuts, reducing the scale and scope of what statistics were made available to the public. These contradictory trends of expansiveness and contraction lead us to consider administrative and policy dilemmas over the value of statistics to the governance of criminal justice systems. One of the central concerns in this book is how government officials treat crime statistics through valuation, preparation and publication procedures. To understand these procedures, the book turns to the Home Office archives to examine the coordinated actions and troubles circulating around the Home Office during the survey's preparation. Although Home Office officials have accounted for the origins of the British Crime Survey in contemporary and

[11]Young noted that administrative criminology had an 'affinity' with 'left idealist' criminology: 'Both stressed the exaggerated fear of crime on the part of the public, pinpointing the mass media as the source of undue anxiety. Both seem to relegate the police to a marginal role in the fight against the majority of crime. For the new administrative criminologists the police can do little against the majority of crime which is both minor and opportunistic' (Lea and Young, 1993, p. xxxiv).