

Community safety

Summary

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WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU



Crime recording 2005

Improving the quality of crime records in police authorities
and forces in England and Wales

Summary

Reliable information based on high-quality data is critical for effective police action to reduce crime, to reassure the public and to make people feel safer in their neighbourhoods. It is also essential for stakeholders and policymakers in the criminal justice field, including government, parliament, media and the wider public. Crime information has to be reliable and readily accessible to those who need it. This enables forces to make the right operational decisions and police authorities to properly scrutinise police performance.

But the importance of high-quality data extends beyond this. Crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) or, in Wales, community safety partnerships (CSPs), place great reliance on police data when addressing crime and anti-social behaviour locally. Above all, if local people are to be able to hold councils and their community safety partners to account, they must be able to trust the information they get about local crime levels.

User confidence takes time to build, but the first step is to ensure that data is fit for purpose. The Home Office, through the Police and Crime Standards Directorate (PCSD), has sponsored a programme of data quality reviews which have been carried out over the last three years by auditors appointed by the Audit Commission and the Auditor General for Wales. These reviews have confirmed that most police authorities and forces are now achieving a good standard of crime data quality.

The National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) has had a positive impact in this area. The NCRS, which was introduced in 2002, requires forces to take a victim-focused approach and to record crimes according to a set of clear principles. It has resulted in a much more consistent approach to the collection of data and recording of crime.

Since 2003 most police authorities and forces have done a great deal to improve compliance with national standards for crime recording. The most successful have achieved improvements through determined championing of data quality by the authority and at both force and local level. They have integrated their processes and systems for crime recording to ensure that compliance with national data quality standards is built in to all force activity, and not treated as an add-on.

The key messages from our reviews of crime recording in 2005¹ are:

- There has been significant improvement in crime recording performance in the last three years, in terms of both data quality and the arrangements in place to support effective crime recording practices.
 - Most authorities and forces now have a right first time approach to crime recording, but there are still some forces undertaking high levels of checking to achieve their improved rating. This does not represent a good use of public resources and cannot be sustainable in the longer term.
 - While there has been significant overall improvement in performance, room for further progress remains. A small number of forces have failed to improve performance or to sustain previous levels of performance, and only one force has achieved an excellent rating for its management arrangements.
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Other forces can learn from the best performers in developing robust accountability mechanisms linking audit to action, in training their frontline and call handling staff, in making intelligent use of customer surveys and in ensuring that activity is linked to outcomes that matter to people. The Policing Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF) links force performance on data quality to overall assessments of achievement and encourages a more consistent approach to crime recording.

In 2003, there were 12 authorities and forces (28 per cent) that achieved a good standard of data quality and only 4 (9 per cent) that had satisfactory management arrangements. Since then there has been a significant improvement, with 35 forces (81 per cent) achieving good or excellent assessments for data quality in 2005 and 29 (67 per cent) with good or excellent management arrangements. There is now one force that has been assessed as excellent for both data quality and management arrangements (**Figure 1**).

Authorities and forces have made substantial year-on-year improvements. Data quality has risen steadily each year. While most forces' data quality was rated as poor or fair in 2003 and as good in 2004, in 2005, 20 (47 per cent) were rated as excellent.

Management arrangements improved most markedly between 2004 and 2005.

Twenty-nine authorities and forces (67 per cent) were rated as good or excellent in 2005 compared with eight (19 per cent) in 2004.

¹ Reviews took place during the financial year 2005/06.

Figure 1
Improvements in data quality and management arrangements
 Since 2003 there has been a significant improvement.



Source: Audit Commission

As well as improving overall, data quality no longer shows such wide variations either between forces or within forces at the local police basic command unit (BCU) level. Changed operational practices, more centralised recording of crime through force call centres and better systems and processes have all contributed to this greater consistency. Effective leadership, training and awareness-raising have helped the best-performing forces to deliver sustained improvement across the board.

Across England and Wales we found widespread evidence of better recording of each of the main categories of crime for which records were examined and not just those that are the focus of national crime reduction targets. We found, however, a handful of forces where recording standards were unacceptably low for racial incidents, disturbance and violent crime.

Most authorities and forces have acted on the Commission's previous recommendations and ensured that there is a right first time approach to crime recording, with strong leadership supporting the necessary cultural shift. These include some that were previously over-reliant on expensive internal checking mechanisms focused on getting through audits and other annual reviews. These forces have replaced their central checking teams with more robust arrangements which embed a culture of compliance.

Nevertheless, five forces (12 per cent) continue to undertake high levels of checking. This is a poor use of valuable resources and cannot be sustainable in the longer term. If they are to maximise the benefit of investment in crime recording systems and processes, authorities and forces must secure permanent cultural change.

While the great majority of authorities and forces have improved the quality of both their data and underlying management arrangements, there are four forces (9 per cent) where data quality results were worse in 2005 than in 2004 and three others (7 per cent) where management arrangements have been allowed to deteriorate. These results emphasise the need for a consistent focus on data quality at all levels.


This focus will be all the more important as the police service enters a period of restructuring. There are lessons to learn from the experience of forces that have successfully reduced inconsistencies between BCUs by introducing effective centralised call centres with staff trained in the NCRS. Where forces are merging, plans need to be in place to assess systems, make decisions on supporting processes and identify how to maintain and improve data quality standards for the merged force. This will require firm

leadership as well as a willingness to learn from the best practice that exists in the good and excellent forces and in pockets elsewhere.

Efforts to improve data quality will be supported by service-wide performance management processes, particularly through the PPAF. Auditors will also continue to monitor the implementation of authorities' improvement plans. But the responsibility for securing and maintaining high levels of data quality rests with each individual authority and force. Audits have shown that good and excellent forces share a number of characteristics such as:

- keeping a strong emphasis on victim-focused crime recording and ensuring the integrity of the data used to measure performance;
- managing risks to data quality through robust systems and processes and proportionate audit rather than intensive checking;
- using audit results to focus and drive improvement;
- ensuring that data quality issues are addressed through staff and officer development reviews (PDR), and that improvement is supported through a network of local champions;
- being aware of the importance of maintaining a consistent focus on data quality through the restructuring process; and
- improving data quality on a continuous basis and building user confidence by ensuring that data is fit for purpose and accessible to all users.

The improvement over the past three years is not just about compliance with a technical standard. It shows that a better, more victim-focused service is being provided to local people across England and Wales. The challenge now is to improve further as policing enters a period of substantial change with the introduction of strategic authorities and forces.

 Copies of the full report are available at: www.audit-commission.gov.uk or to order a printed copy telephone: **0800 502030** quoting stock code: **LAR3344**

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