

1915

Criminal Statistics Report of Committee No 3 of the Institute

John Koren

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

John Koren, Criminal Statistics Report of Committee No 3 of the Institute, 5 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 653 (May 1914 to March 1915)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

CRIMINAL STATISTICS, (REPORT OF COMMITTEE NO 3 OF
THE INSTITUTE).¹

JOHN KOREN, CHAIRMAN.²

There are three general sources of statistics of crime: (1) The records of the police; (2) the records of the criminal courts (including those of official prosecutors); and (3) the records of penal institutions.

In previous reports of this Committee emphasis has been laid chiefly upon the need of drawing statistics of crime from the records of the courts. The reason for this is fairly obvious since the criminal court records provide us with a measure of the extent and character of the criminality which is brought to trial before the various tribunals, and at the same time enable us to observe the operations of the legal machinery devised not only as a check upon but as a corrective of criminality. Supplementary to the statistics from court records we have regarded those relating to probation work.

In respect to statistical compilations from this first source, it must be confessed that great progress has not been made since the foundation of the Institute. The need of adequate criminal statistics is perhaps more clearly recognized than ever, and interest in them has certainly not subsided, as witness the constant references to the subject and the more frequent publication of statistical studies, for instance, the analysis of the work of the Supreme Court of Illinois, the examinations of court records in Wisconsin, etc. But the country still awaits the establishment in any State of a bureau endowed with sufficient authority and properly equipped for the collection of statistics of crime. Nor has any existing statistical bureau been empowered to extend its functions for the purpose of doing this particular work. Here and there enactment of the necessary legislation has been sought, but so far without much success. The hopes awakened by the brave effort in Illinois to create a bureau of criminal statistics have not yet materialized for

¹Committee report presented at the Washington meeting of the Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, October 22, 1914.

²The membership of the Committee is as follows: John Koren, Boston, chairman; Chas. A. Ellwood, Columbia; Edward Lindsey, Esq., Warren, Pa.; Frank L. Randall, Boston; Louis N. Robinson, Swarthmore College; Eugene Smith, New York City; A. W. Towne, Brooklyn; A. L. Bowen, Springfield, Ill.; R. E. Chaddock, Columbia University; A. J. Todd, University of Pittsburg; Frank W. Blackmur, University of Kansas; R. B. Herbert, Columbia, N. C.; Dr. Isaac Hourwich, Brooklyn.

JOHN KOREN

reasons which need not be considered in this report. It is becoming increasingly evident that the agitation for special or already existing State Bureaus as agents to collect criminal statistics must be directed by State branches of this Institute and not by a general committee whose members are scattered all over the country. The fond anticipation that the United States Bureau of the Census would demonstrate what can and ought to be done by gathering and publishing criminal judicial statistics on a country-wide scale has been disappointed and there is no indication of its realization in the near future.

The annual crop of statistics of penal institutions continues to be very much of the same old character. Some of it is unquestionably of local usefulness, particularly that gathered by certain State Boards, but much may be described as unripe fruit, not fit even for the toughest statistical digestion. Although the institutional variety of criminal statistics occupies a limited field, its helpfulness could be greatly enhanced by additional inquiries and improved methods of presentation. It should be remembered, too, that it lends itself in a particular way to highly specialized studies. Here another disappointment must be recorded. The decennial report on prisoners and juvenile delinquents issued by the Bureau of the Census for the year 1910 is this time not only greatly belated, having made its appearance in 1914, but consists of but a few general tables; the document is of slight utility. The causes of this misadventure are foreign to our report. The uncomfortable fact remains, however, that our sole means of surveying the conditions of crime as manifested by prison returns for the whole country has this time been denied us.

The third channel through which one should expect a continuous flow of elementary but none the less essential information about crime may be likened at present to a turbid stream under low pressure whose tributaries are clogged and sometimes wholly dried up. We refer to the records and reports of the police which form the principal topic of this report.

Police statistics may be called the primary element of criminal statistics. Criminal judicial statistics perforce deal only with that portion of criminality which comes before the courts for adjudication. Prison statistics are self-evidently limited to that output of the courts which has been pronounced fit for punishment and reformation. But police records have for their material the incidence of crime in the community, the work of discovering its perpetrators

CRIMINAL STATISTICS

and bringing them before the proper authority for examination and eventual trial. Thus the records of the police when translated into well-ordered and analyzed statistics should provide the starting point from which one may proceed in an intelligent inquiry concerning the conditions in respect to crime in any community, the numbers and kinds of offenses actually committed, the proportion of offenders apprehended or the disposition made of them through the medium of the police. Furthermore, it lies in the nature of things that under the ideal conditions police records should furnish data of the greatest importance relative to general social aspects of the crime problem and more especially relative to the history of offenders. To put it briefly, police statistics should furnish the first link in the chain of statistical evidence about crime which we must forge unless we are content continually to grope blindly in our efforts to deal with an undiminishing and sorely pressing social problem.

Yet to speak knowingly of police statistics, such as we have in this country, is equivalent to uttering some uncomplimentary truths, for the official information afforded about the operations of the first line of defence established against criminality is as a whole lamentably insufficient, crude and unworthy of enlightened communities that bear ever-increasing burdens for the protection of life and property against the criminal.

Before citing the facts upon which this characterization is based, let us instance the kind of information an interested public may reasonably expect to find in the police record of any large city. It is unnecessary to dwell on statements in regard to the personnel of the police, its numbers, divisions, distribution, general equipment, cost of maintenance, etc. Not that a clear-cut presentation of these things is unimportant, quite the contrary, but they are more likely to be over-emphasized than not in an otherwise wholly incomplete and incompetent report. Our main concern, however, is with presentations of the activities of the police against crime. In order that they may be exhibited satisfactorily, it seems necessary as a minimum requirement that police reports should present in adequate tabular forms:

(1) *The total amount of crime*, classified under appropriate headings, which has been brought to the notice of the police during the year, with comparisons for previous periods and accompanied by ratios to population for the respective years.

(2) *The whole number of arrests made during the year*, with comparisons of previous years and ratios to population, classified by

JOHN KOREN

offenses or charges, age, color, sex, place of residence, nativity, parent nativity, and number of previous arrests.

The difference between numbers one and two would give the proportion of the reported crime remaining unaccounted for.

(3) *The disposition of the persons arrested*, showing the numbers released for want of evidence or other reasons, the numbers brought to trial or otherwise disposed of (referred to societies, sent to other places, etc.), the outcome of trial and final disposition of persons convicted and sentenced, both misdemeanants and felons. (The disposition of cases, to be adequately shown, should be checked up by the work of prosecuting officers. It is never done and cannot easily be accomplished until States Attorneys or District Attorneys are compelled, as they should be, to give a public account of their doings.)

(4) *Special tabular presentation of police work* relative to neglected or delinquent children, probation cases, etc.

It is not attempted in the above to indicate statistical forms, but simply to summarize matter that should be made the object statistical presentation. There are, of course, numerous police activities not referred to which demand adequate statement, for instance, those relating to street traffic, casualties of all kinds, licenses, inspection work, the recovery of lost property, etc.

Now what do current police reports actually afford by way of information in regard to the work of detecting and preventing crime?

The basis for a reply has been obtained by studying the annual ment.

reports of the police departments of the following cities: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Boston, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Buffalo, San Francisco, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Newark, New Orleans, Washington, Minneapolis, Seattle, Indianapolis, Denver, Louisville, Atlanta, New Haven, Richmond, Omaha and Grand Rapids, a total of 25 cities, and certainly representative in point of population.

A separate analysis of the police reports for these cities would manifestly be beyond the limits of this report and necessitate much tedious repetition. But they have certain characteristics in common which can be summarized and furnish ample evidence.

To begin with, not a single one of the reports in question adequately meets the above mentioned minimum requirements or can be recommended as a general model, although the degree of excellence, or rather of imperfections, varies greatly. More than this, among the cities under consideration there is at least one which does not

CRIMINAL STATISTICS

even regularly issue a report of its police work and another which confines itself to the use of a few blank forms purporting to give certain general details and evidently not intended for publication but simply for submission to the Mayor and City Council.

It seems almost incredible, yet is a fact, that cities of over 150,000 population in this country are not in the habit of issuing regular reports in regard to police work.

The features common to the published reports immediately under consideration may be stated as follows:

(1) *Lack of Comparability.* Not only is there a total absence of uniformity in methods of presentation for the different cities, but also in matter treated. In addition, there is not always comparability between different issues of reports for the same city; and as a rule, no decent effort is made to institute comparisons year by year.

(2) *Lack of Elementary Facts.* Of crimes perpetrated, but which do not result in arrests, there is rarely any mention. The variations in arrests from one period to another are not accounted for or at least not in the light of population changes, new legislation, etc. Concerning persons arrested, a distinction is usually made as to sex, but much more seldom as to color. Even some large cities with a very numerous colored population do not attempt the distinction in question. The relation of the foreign born to crime is not so tabulated that it can be brought into relation to the amount of crime attributable to them or in any way make it evident what part the foreign born play in the criminal relations. The population facts given, if any, are only exceptionally combined with the offenses. Comparatively few police reports show the nativity of persons arrested, never the parent nativity, and not in one instance is this matter of nativity brought into relation with offenses. The occupations of the arrested are commonly given, but regularly consist of a simple unclassified enumeration which is absolutely valueless since it cannot be studied in connection with offenses nor in the light of the distribution of the general population by occupation. Age classifications of prisoners are for the most part wholly wanting. As a rule the offences for which persons are arrested are enumerated alphabetically without any attempt at proper groupings. Twelve out of twenty-five reports are silent or practically so on the question of how the persons arrested were disposed of; that is, how many were brought to trial, the issue of the trial, etc. It is quite exceptional that one can determine the final outcome and then almost exclusively in the cases of misdemean-

ants. What happens to those coming before the higher courts is clearly set forth in but one out of the 25 reports.

(3) *Lack of Analysis.* In but half a dozen of the 25 reports is effort made to summarize the statistical evidence in such way that its significant features are brought out authoritatively. For the rest, the reader is left to seek his own way in the maze of statistical state-

(4) *Lack of Order and Accuracy.* The statistical tables given are for the most part a jumble, with insufficient or even misleading headings and confused in arrangement. Often they are scattered throughout the volume, being sandwiched in between irrelevant matter. Errors abound, some plainly due to amateur proofreading, and some to gross carelessness.

(5) *The Statistical Presentation* is usually subordinated to other matter, some of which may even be of dubious value. In general, the space given to the consideration of the most important parts of police work, namely that relating to crime, is utterly inadequate. One wonders how, for instance, in the case of the largest city in the country, it is possible to set forth the crime situation from the police point of view in less than ten pages of tabulation. And what a comment on the estimate of relative values to find one of our chief cities giving six pages to arrests and offences and three times that number to parading the names and ranks of the members of the uniformed force! The difference merely in matter of printed pages occupied by police reports indicates a striking divergence of views as to their importance and value. For example, one is prompted to ask how it is that cities like Buffalo and Baltimore require each about 140 pages for the annual statement of police work, while San Francisco contents itself with 25 and Chicago with a scant 50. To be sure, the merits of a police report are not to be measured by the number of its printed pages, yet the differences in this respect reveal in some degree how differently and generally how inadequately the importance of public information in regard to the police is rated.

But if it is true of all the publications under consideration that they give less space than seems needed to statistics of crime, it is usually true that most of them pay disproportionate attention to relatively unimportant things, while some are guilty of presenting questionable matter. An example of the last mentioned is a report which gives long pages of tables showing the number of arrests and "assists" credited to each member of the force. Here and there one finds other evidence of a greater concern about exploiting the services of indi-

CRIMINAL STATISTICS

viduals than about informing the public in regard to vital aspects of social conditions.

Since it is a fact that the police reports of many of our largest and presumably most advanced cities fall so far below even a modest standard of completeness and excellence, what must be the truth in regard to the multitude of smaller communities in which the crime question, if of less magnitude, is still one of prime importance? To point out the shortcomings, especially of a statistical nature, of official reports is a comparatively simple, although distasteful task. Happily, it is not our province to apportion blame except in a general way. We may reasonably begin by instancing our own indifference.

If the intelligent public demanded better police statistics they would surely be forthcoming. While no doubt many police officials do not clearly perceive or are careless about their duties to enlighten the public, others realize the justification of precisely such criticism as this report voices. They are, however, hampered by insufficient appropriations for statistical work and even more by lack of trained help. Assuredly, it is not a matter for the apprentice hand to prepare a thoroughly satisfactory scheme for presenting police statistics. Among other desiderata is that of securing comparability between the police work of different places; but it is beset by many difficulties, owing not only to differences in police organization and prescribed duties, but to differences in laws governing the prosecution and adjudication of crime.

This committee has not undertaken to recommend a model for the compilation and presentation of police statistics. It cannot be done satisfactorily without consulting the authorities in many municipalities nor without a careful study of local needs and local limitations. We venture to suggest, however, that the Institute give the question continued attention and seek to work out an adequate scheme of general adaptability in conjunction with the National Association of Chiefs of Police.