

Statistics, data collection and case management

Section 10 explores the relevance of data collection to policing and its importance for case management. Reliable data bases reveal the seriousness and extent of problems and provide a basis for meaningful statistics. Systematic data collection is essential for effective case management.

Why collect data?

Data should be collected at all levels – local, national and international. If possible, data should be systematically collected via networked computer programmes, but if this is not possible in all jurisdictions, paper records are preferable to non-recording. Data collation and analysis provide a basis for short- and long-term strategic plans and operational responses, so the easier and time-efficient the recording system is to use and to share results, the better it is.

For operational purposes data should be collected at all stages of the progression of individual cases beginning with the original request for assistance in order to establish the link with police investigative procedures. This will allow any weaknesses in police investigation and procedures to be identified. Collation of specific information across local forces provides regional and national data for policy, legislation, and resource allocation. To avoid misleading and ultimately meaningless statistics, well thought out definitions of the data to be collected are needed. Defining the data to be collected should arise from the purposes for which it is required.

Data bases on violence against women and children can be used simultaneously for a number of different purposes. These can be to:

- alert police, who often under-estimate the seriousness of the issues, to the extent and importance of the problems
- provide information on the aetiology of the abuse
- provide information for the deployment of resources
- identify repeat offenders
- identify repeat victims
- provide information for managers on individual and collective police responses
- justify the expansion of police operations
- justify funding and resources
- provide a basis for police input into law reform processes.

What data should be collected?

Relevant cases are all police attendances to requests for assistance from women and children, both when officers go out to calls and when requests are made for assistance by victims and others at the station. To enter every relevant case requires officers to understand which situations require entry. Correct identification codes must be given. The primary indicator is the relationship between the alleged perpetrator(s) and the victim(s). 'Domestic' requires an inclusive definition; boyfriends, partners, ex-partners, children living with and separate, and other household members. Where extended family is important, for example, multiple wives or in-laws, then they too should be included in the definition of domestic. All officers must be given training to ensure that they understand these definitions.

Relevant information on individual cases includes: name(s) of perpetrators, name(s) of victims, address of both, if different; brief description of reasons for attendance or call to the station; immediate outcome, identification of officer(s). Other data can be included, such as age, ethnicity/race, and subsequent action should be added or be kept in a form where it is easy to connect to the immediate response data.

Data collection issues

Police statistics and any data produced from them, however, will only be as valuable as the original information provided. Flawed data can result from

- not entering every relevant case
- relevant information not included
- incorrect information in entries
- inadequate collation and statistical treatment.

All of these errors are very easy to make.

It is not always easy to determine who is responsible for the entry of incorrect or missing data, particularly when more than one person is responsible, for example, when other officers or civilian staff allocate work to officers who make emergency responses and entries are jointly made starting from the initial request for assistance to the conclusion of the attendance. It is, however, essential that managerial checks on data entry are made on a regular basis in order to correct deficiencies.

Collation and statistical treatment of data should be considered at the same time as the planning for its collection. Consideration should be given to the production of frequencies, of cross-tabulations, and, for repeat victimisation data in particular, tests of significance and multi-variate analyses. Operational officers involved in cases and statistical collection should be given regular feedback on the collected data so that they appreciate the importance of their contribution to the process.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in data collection is the use being made of alterations and additions to criminal law. This will identify training needs and it should reveal the value of the particular reform strategy.

Data from non-police sources

Because most assaults on women and children are not reported to the police, other ways of assessing the extent and type of crime are needed. Some jurisdictions collect national data via victimisation surveys using large-scale survey techniques. An even larger number of jurisdictions have small-scale qualitative and quantitative surveys undertaken by agencies and academics. These can be very useful to policing as they often provide the victim's perspective, the extent and type of violence experienced, the help-seeking activities of victims, and the response of family, friends, workmates, statutory and voluntary agencies. Statistics also may be collected and collated by the social services, medical personnel and NGOs providing direct services to women and children, such as women's groups. These independent research studies provide data for the training of officers.

Sharing comparative analysis of information from whatever source is extremely valuable, as it assists in recognising the services required. Openness in sharing the results of police recording serves to give the police credibility and also serves as an informal monitoring process for the police, improving reporting and flow of information within the force. It also assists in the development of policy and good practice.

GUIDELINES

- Statistical data bases are essential to shape responses to the issues of domestic and sexual crime. Thorough information gathering also provides a basis to inform legislative change and to monitor the effectiveness of current and amended laws. This in turn, provides accurate information to shape appropriate legal changes.
- Clear definitions must be used when gathering data.
- Data should be collected continually and at all levels – local, provincial, national, regional and international.
- Data should be culled from sources other than the police.
- Data should be collected from the perspective of the victim and other concerned agencies, as well as from the perspective of the police.
- Data and statistical information must be shared with other agencies, and be analysed by qualified statisticians so that trends and areas requiring further research are quickly identified.
- A code of ethics governing the collection, use and sharing of statistical information and other data should be developed. This code should particularly reflect the importance of confidentiality to the victim.