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Article

"Regional crime rates and fear of crime: Distinct north-south divide - unified measurement methods needed": Six questions to Martin Kroh

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Prof. Dr. Martin Kroh is Deputy Head of the Socio-Economic Panel Study at DIW Berlin

SIX QUESTIONS TO MARTIN KROH

»Regional Crime Rates and Fear of Crime: Distinct North-South Divide—Unified Measurement Methods Needed«

1. Professor Kroh, there are a number of ways of measuring a region's crime rate. What are the differences between the various methods? As a general rule, crime rates are measured based on police crime statistics which include reported crimes differentiated by date and region. This is actually a very good basis. However, if the aim is to determine a region's crime rate, police crime statistics also have certain weaknesses. First, there is the issue of "light and dark" crime figures whereby some offenses go unreported. The second issue is how to weight the different crimes in relation to one another. Murder has quite a different significance to pickpocketing, for instance.
2. How do the findings differ? There are various ways of weighting criminal offenses relative to one another. One method might be, for example, on the basis of the amount of damages insurers pay out to quantify specific offenses. Here, damages for murder would of course be many times higher than those resulting from a pickpocketing offense. If we apply this weighting method we can see, for instance, that a rural region where a murder happened to be committed would be evaluated as having a very high crime rate. Other methods would not assign as much weight to this murder but would take greater account of the relationship between different criminal offenses.
3. What is the correlation between the objective crime rate and subjective fear of crime? In this project, we have tried to use similar methods to measure both the subjective fear of crime and objective crime rates. The findings demonstrate that fear and the objective crime rate are fairly clearly in line with one another. Thus, people have a relatively accurate perception of the level of crime in their local area.
4. What regional differences can be seen from the project's findings? In northern Germany, the fear of crime is considerably higher than in the south of the country which also corresponds with the actual crime rates and, as expected, the level of fear is somewhat higher in urban than in rural areas. However, there are also regions where the fear of crime is higher than the actual crime rate or vice versa. For example, Cologne is a city where the fear of crime is comparatively low while the real threat is relatively high. In the Stuttgart area, on the other hand, at least according to our findings, the fear of crime is greater than the actual threat.
5. Did your project also consider more abstract crimes such as white-collar or Internet crime? Our study focuses in particular on the threat to individuals and so does not take white-collar crimes into consideration. However, the analysis does include cybercrime at least where the victim is a member of the public rather than a company or bank. When measuring crime, Internet crime is an important issue since the number of unreported offenses here is significant. Very few cybercrimes are reported, perhaps because the level of damages is so low. The urban/rural divide is also considerably less pronounced here since victims and perpetrators do not necessarily have to be located in the same region.
1. Which measurement method do you feel is the most informative? As a methodologist, I think that the statistical method we describe in our report is the most robust. However, in my view, ultimately the most important thing is to agree on one method. Currently, any statements made on the development of crime in Germany are based on police criminal statistics. However, it would be more useful to agree on a method that also takes unreported offenses and the severity of a crime into consideration so that differences or changes in crime rates can be better documented.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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