

Contemporary Comments

What Data Can You Get From BOCSAR?

The purpose of this Comment is to further the academic debate about the use and availability of crime statistics and to respond to Clancey's Contemporary Comment (Clancey 2011) in the March 2011 issue of *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*. Clancey (2011) made a number of points on the use of crime statistics in crime prevention and evaluation, and this included comment on the information available from the New South Wales (NSW) Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). While he made a number of valid points about the importance of local level crime data for crime prevention planning and evaluation purposes, this response seeks to correct and comment upon some aspects of Clancey's Comment in relation to BOCSAR.

Factual issues

Clancey (2011:493) stated that 'it is also possible to download crime map reports and now, hotspot maps for some LGAs'. This is incorrect. It is possible to download crime maps for 11 crime types across all 154 LGAs (Local Government Areas) in NSW. If any area within an LGA has a high density of crime relative to other geographic areas in the state, a hotspot will be shown on the map. The only reason BOCSAR does not provide a map is where there is no hotspot for a given offence within the LGA. These maps can be accessed by going to the BOCSAR's home page, clicking on 'crime statistics' and then clicking on 'crime maps'.

Clancey (2011:495) expresses concern about a change in the format of the BOCSAR's crime mapping reports. He correctly observes that BOCSAR has stopped providing one large encompassing report containing maps, incidents, offenders, victims, alcohol-related crime, crime by premises types, and crime by day/time. BOCSAR now provides a smaller report containing hotspot maps without these additional data tables. Clancey (2011:495) notes that 'the loss of this [additional] information is an unwelcome development'. There are three points to be made about this change in policy:

1. This information has not been lost. It is still available from the website by clicking on an LGA from the map on our homepage, then on the link to 'Excel tables'.
2. The primary reason for separately reporting the maps and the tables is that BOCSAR could not provide the larger crime mapping reports for all LGAs in NSW within existing resources. Each report took a significant amount of time to collate, format, check and publish. Prior to moving to the separate reporting system, BOCSAR was only able to compile LGA reports for 61 LGAs. BOCSAR now compiles the shorter crime mapping reports annually for all 154 LGAs in NSW. The subsidiary tables are provided in a separate report.
3. Client feedback indicated that people were primarily interested in the hotspot maps and much of the other information contained in the reports was redundant. It is, therefore, more efficient, particularly for those on dial-up internet connections, to have the maps available for download separately from the subsidiary tables.

Clancey (2011:495) also notes that ‘crime map reports and hotspot maps are only published for 12-month periods, making comparisons of hotspots over shorter periods of time difficult, and the reports are generally published 9-12 months after the close of the calendar year for which the data are being reported’. He claims ‘this time lag reduces the utility of the crime map publications’ (Clancey 2011:495). The first part of this statement is true, but BOCSAR would happily provide crime maps over shorter periods of time if asked to do so. To our knowledge, nobody has ever made a request to BOCSAR to provide hotspot maps over shorter periods of time. The second part of the statement is also true (namely, that reports are generally published 9-12 months after the close of the calendar year). Some delay is, unfortunately, unavoidable. The location information received by BOCSAR from NSW Police is quite poor. In many cases, BOCSAR staff have to geocode crime incidents (ie assign longitude and latitude coordinates) by hand. Users of our data will be pleased to know that from 2011, new geocoding procedures have enabled us to geocode, produce and publish crime maps for all 154 LGAs within six months of the close of the calendar year.

Policy issues

Clancey (2011:494) correctly notes that LGA is the unit of aggregation that BOCSAR reports on. He then indicates that ‘data presented for an LGA can ultimately be of little utility for the purposes of crime prevention planning’ (Clancey 2011:494). BOCSAR would argue that this is precisely the level of aggregation that local government seeks for planning purposes. In fact, BOCSAR cannot recall a situation where it has been approached for information from local government for planning purposes at any other level of aggregation. Local government typically needs to identify which crimes are most problematic for them, at-risk times and factors associated with that crime type (eg alcohol or domestic violence). This is also the sort of information that is requested by the Crime Prevention Division of the NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice, from whom local councils seek crime-prevention funding.

Of course, interventions seldom take place across the entire LGA and evaluation of programs sometimes requires a lower level of aggregation. Once again, however, data at lower levels of aggregation are available on request. Since the advent of our mapping unit in 2005/06, BOCSAR has responded to hundreds of queries for information at levels of aggregation that are lower than the LGA or the suburb. There are, nonetheless, some constraints on the availability of data at very small levels of spatial aggregation. Some clients — and local government are particularly prone to this — ask for information about a particular crime disaggregated to a very low level. For example, they might ask for a table showing a particular crime type for the most recent year broken down by the age (juvenile, adult, unknown), sex (male, female, unknown) and Indigenous status (Indigenous, non-Indigenous, unknown) of the victim by month of the year. If one imagines the resulting 3 x 3 x 3 x 12 table, the cell sizes become very small. Even though these data do not specifically identify any individual, such low counts within cells *can be used to identify* individuals. This is why BOCSAR usually tries to steer clients to higher levels of aggregation, if it will answer the question that clients come to us with. If it will not help and the privacy of victims and alleged offenders can be maintained, BOCSAR has and will continue to provide information at levels of aggregation that are lower than that of the LGA.

BOCSAR's new information service policy

Other improvements are in train. From June 2011, BOCSAR began publishing maps showing crime rates at the level of postcode. These will enable clients to compare population-adjusted rates of crime across areas at a lower level of aggregation than LGA. BOCSAR is unable to provide these maps at a lower level than postcode because, even at the postcode level, populations tend to be very small. When rates are calculated based on small denominators, they are very sensitive to small deviations in crime numbers.

BOCSAR also have a new information service policy. The major changes to our policy include:

1. There is no longer a cost associated with the provision of our complete postcode level dataset.
2. It has been made explicit that data are available at levels of aggregation other than that of the LGA or postcode.
3. Subject to privacy considerations, incident point maps and latitude/longitude data may be available for research purposes. BOCSAR Information Officers will be happy to outline the requirements to access these data and the limits on disclosure that BOCSAR must adhere to under privacy legislation.

If you are a user of our data, please read our new information services policy and let us know what you think: <<http://tinyurl.com/4yl4tjs>>. BOCSAR also encourages you to compare the access you have to crime and justice data in NSW compared with other Australian States and Territories.

Craig Jones

Deputy Director, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Don Weatherburn

Director, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

References

Clancey, G (2011) 'Are we still "Flying Blind"? Crime Data and Local Crime Prevention in New South Wales', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 22(3), 491–500