



ETHICAL ISSUES

Misreporting in the UCR

In 2009, the *Dallas Morning News* revealed that the Dallas Police Department had been purposefully recording attempted burglaries as acts of simple vandalism. The same news agency discovered that police also misreported violent crimes. In several instances, the police department recorded violent attacks as less serious crimes. Specifically, the police department reported 75 of 500 assaults as aggravated, while listing the remainder as simple assaults. Simple assaults—because they are not Part I crimes—are not used in the calculation of the official crime rate. An investigation indicated that 40 of the crimes reported as simple assault should have been recorded as aggravated assault because the incidents involved victims being attacked with various weapons, including bottles, pipes, bats, rocks, bricks, chairs, and bar stools. Others involved attempted strangling, serious injuries, and the brandishing of a knife as well as a rifle. The extent of this misreporting was large enough to make it appear that Dallas's violent crime rate was decreasing. FBI experts and the Texas Department of Public Safety, which manages the UCR data collection effort, confirmed the findings of the news. With appropriate reporting, the violent crime rate may still have shown a decline, but not as dramatic.

Detroit has also been plagued with problematic reporting. The Detroit Police Department admitted in 2001 that it had misreported rape and murder numbers throughout the 1990s. With the erroneous

reporting, the department appeared to have one of the highest arrest rates, though the data were so flawed that it is unclear how many suspects were actually arrested. The errors were so large that Detroit's homicide arrest figures skewed the FBI's homicide arrest statistics for the entire nation. Detroit reported that it had been arresting murder suspects at three times the national rate and rape suspects at twice the national rate. The department maintains that the misreporting was not an effort to deceive, but rather honest errors.

Though not widespread, these examples highlight one potential issue with using data from the UCR or other official police records: deliberate misreporting.

Think About It

Pretend that you are the mayor of a city and discover that your police department has been misrepresenting crime data for your jurisdiction.

1. How would you ethically handle this in terms of informing the public and holding responsible parties accountable?
2. What if you are an analyst working in the city and your boss asks you to alter the data to make the city look safer? How would you ethically handle this?