

A Breath of Fresh Air: The Irish Breathalyser Statistics Debacle

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It has long been understood that crime statistics are notoriously ‘difficult’ to use and interpret (Coleman, 1996). Deficiencies in reporting are a feature that has been noted internationally (Lynch & Addington, 2007), while other commentators have explored the more political nature of crime statistics and their uses (Carr-Hill & Stern, 1979).

Issues of data quality in police statistics came under the spotlight in Ireland recently when, on March 23rd 2017, An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police) released a statement to the press noting that they were ‘unable to reconcile’ figures on the number of breathalyser tests performed by the police between 2011 and 2016 from Medical Bureau of Road Safety data with those on the Garda Website (Garda, 2017). As a result An Garda Síochána withdrew its data on this issue from the Garda Website.

The discrepancy between the data provided by The Medical Bureau of Road Safety and An Garda Síochána is significant. The computerised information system used by An Garda Síochána is called the PULSE system, which ironically enough is an acronym for Police Using Leading Systems Effectively. According to the PULSE system between 2011 and 2016 breathalyser tests were administered a total of 1,995,369 times. However, figures from The Medical Bureau of Road Safety put the figure at little over 50% of that number, at 1,058,157.

It is important to put these figures in context. The discrepancy of 937,212 is particularly notable given the relatively small population in Ireland. Preliminary data from the Irish 2016 Census indicates a total population of 4,757,976. Seventeen is the legal age of driving a car in Ireland. Although a breakdown by age of the 2016 Census is not yet available at the time of writing, the population under 17 years of age in Ireland in 2011 was 1,074,822. Assuming slight population differences it is probably safe to assume a population of driving age of at least 3.75 million in 2016. The over-reporting therefore is roughly equivalent to almost exactly 25% of the population of driving age.

RTE, the State broadcaster, commented that:

‘Gardaí say they do not know why it happened and have pointed to system and policy failures. However, they accepted it is reasonable for people to conclude many of the figures were just being made up.’ (Byrne 2017)

Ireland’s Police Authority (2017) also weighed in on the issue with a damning statement that:

‘This is not just an academic statistical matter, it is an ethical one. It raises serious questions of integrity for the Garda Síochána organisation and combined with previous issues regarding inflated activity levels, erodes confidence in the credibility of Garda data generally... It again raises concerns about management and supervision... the scale of the discrepancy is further evidence of deep cultural problems within the Garda service – a culture in which such behaviour was possible.’

Deficiencies and inaccuracies in Irish crime and police data are an ongoing issue (The Journal, 2016; CSO, 2016). However, the State’s data and credibility problems are significantly wider. Important deficiencies have long been noted in Ireland’s State information systems across a range of issues from the Census (Houghton et al., 2014) to abortion data (Houghton, 2014) to health information systems (Houghton et al., 2003; Houghton, 2005; Houghton & Houghton, 2015). The Road Safety Authority (RSA) in Ireland however have pointed out that this deficit is crucial from a public health perspective as:

‘The absence of credible and reliable enforcement metrics such as the numbers of drivers being breath tested, makes it almost impossible to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of road safety interventions’ (RSA 2017: 1)

The RSA are particularly concerned about this issue given the 15% increase in deaths on Irish roads in 2016 (RSA, 2016).

Critical information systems in the Irish State have once again been found to be lacking. The reality that individual Garda (police) were simply making up figures relating to the number of breathalyser tests they administered has an almost comical if not surreal aspect to it. However, as noted by the RSA, it not only sabotages attempts to determine effective road safety measures, but more importantly serves to further undermine societal faith in the entire criminal justice system. One positive aspect of this affair is that the issue came to light at all, and that agencies such as the RSA, and the Police Authority discussed

it critically and openly. It is not so long since this level of transparency would have been unthinkable. Still, reflecting on this emerging debacle it is hard not to be reminded of the infamous quotation generally attributed to H. M. Collector of Inland Revenue Sir Isaiah Stamp:

The government is extremely fond of amassing great quantities of statistics. These are raised to the n th degree, the cube roots are extracted, and the results are arranged into elaborate and impressive displays. What must be kept ever in mind, however, is that in every case, the figures are first put down by a village watchman, and he puts down anything he damn well pleases.

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