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ATTACK OF THE KILLER STATS!

HOW SHOCKING NUMBERS BOTH HELP AND HURT

Sarah Armstrong

HAVE YOU HEARD THIS ONE? *'One in three black men in America is in prison.'* Now forget it, because it's not true. Some version of this has been floating around for years. Google the words 'black men prison' and you will hear one-third of them is, has been or will be in prison. These are examples of the killer fact, 'those punchy, memorable, headline-grabbing statistics that cut through the technicalities to fire people up about changing the world' (Green, 2012). Maybe it doesn't matter that these circulated 'facts' are not exactly true. The 'one in three black men' family of 'killer' stats does at least wake us up to the very real and very alarming connection between race and imprisonment in the U.S which has arguably led to policy concern and change.

However, there's a danger to these not quite accurate truths. They create an association in our mind between two things: here it is being black and being in prison, and this association is open to a range of interpretations. Maybe it means the criminal justice system is racist, or maybe it means that black people are more criminal than people of other races, a troubling interpretation used by some as evidence for atavistic theories of crime. One need only scroll down to the comments section of an online newspaper to see how statistical evidence on nearly any topic is invoked as proof of diametrically opposed positions.

The power of the killer stat contains also a danger. They lock in certain ideas and associations, telling us something we did not know but then making it difficult to understand the problem in any other terms

The purveyors of killer stats (and I am one of them) sometimes appear to have too much faith in the neutrality of numbers, in their power to make a self-evident, irrefutable argument. This faith neglects the fact that evidence, statistical and otherwise, is innately emotional and will be read through one's own life experience, values and belief systems. I am endlessly surprised when a killer stat I use, that shoplifting is one of the most common reasons people go to prison in Scotland, leads some to conclude that Scotland has a particularly nasty breed of criminals, the proof of which being how many shoplifters end up inside. If you believe that Glasgow is the murder capital of Europe (it is not, and what a silly concept), you are likely to be looking for evidence of Glasgow hardness in any crime stats on Scotland.

Scotland, prison and social deprivation: the Houchin Report's killer stat

A well known killer stat about Scotland distils the relationship of punishment and social exclusion. It comes from a report by former prisoner governor and Glasgow Caledonian University academic Roger Houchin (2005). He wrote:

'There are 1222 local government election wards in Scotland. The home address of one quarter of the prison population of 6,007 is in just 53 of those wards' (p. 15). He adds that, 'A further quarter [of the prison population] come from the next 102 wards.'

These quotes are a likely source for a speech given two years later by Cabinet Secretary for Justice Kenny MacAskill in which he launched the Scottish Prisons Commission:

'One study indicated that half of our prison population comes from 15 per cent of Scotland's poorest council wards' (MacAskill, 2007).

In fact, the concentration looks even worse than this: adding together Houchin's killer stats shows that half the prison population came from 155 wards out of 1222, or just 13% of local election wards.

However, it is worth noting that a number of these election wards are densely populated so that the 13% of wards where half of prisoners come from account for nearly 900,000 Scottish residents, or almost one fifth of the entire population. What at first looks like extreme concentration of the prison population to a handful of neighbourhoods, is not quite so extreme when set in the context of how many people are living in these neighbourhoods. In other words, half the prison population are coming from places where 20% of the total Scottish population lives. Maybe this tells us as much about population density in deprived communities as it does about prison populations.

It is interesting that in MacAskill's speech 'local government election wards' has been translated as 'poorest council wards' (MacAskill, 2007). Houchin's report does not quite say this; he notes that a small number of areas account for a large portion of prisoners. He does say a bit later that 'the imprisoned population comes disproportionately from the most deprived communities' (p.17), and that there is a 'linear correspondence' of this theorem: the greater the rate of deprivation of a given area, the higher its rate of imprisonment (p. 17). So MacAskill's killer fact, like most, has a few technical inaccuracies but gets across the larger, and statistically validated, point that poverty and prison are connected. But what is the connection and what are the possible misinterpretations of these killer data?

Two associations against which we constantly struggle are first that poverty causes crime, and, second, that poor people are more criminal than other people. Unfortunately, Houchin's killer stat is perfectly positioned to be called on to support either of these two views. People in prison often come from deprived neighbourhoods, does it not follow that people with less money are committing more crime (and hence ending up in prison at higher rates)?

Dig a bit deeper into Houchin's analysis and we see that social deprivation does not seem to hold all the answers. 'Social deprivation is not as concentrated in Edinburgh as it is in Glasgow. Neither is imprisonment. Nor is the imprisoned population as concentrated in Edinburgh in the areas of highest deprivation' (p. 43). Patterns of poverty and imprisonment vary by area suggesting that something about cities and neighbourhoods, and equally about the ways in which they are governed, holds a portion of the answer. The longitudinal study being conducted by Edinburgh criminologists has already begun to suggest that crime and punishment levels say much more about criminal justice official activity than about any underlying difference in people's behaviour (ESYTC).

In place of the poverty=crime or criminality thesis, and the ready appeal of its cause and effect logic, Houchin's analysis urges a shift in how we understand imprisonment itself, not as the result of individual choices or structural factors but as a feature of social environments. Just as people living in the most deprived areas are required to put up with lower air quality, poorer schools, so do they also face a greater risk of imprisonment. This is truly a killer idea that shakes up the way criminologists, the media and policy makers think about punishment.

The power of the killer stat contains also a danger. They lock in certain ideas and associations, telling us something we did not know but then making it difficult to understand the problem in any other terms. Can Americans hear the word 'prisoner' without visualising a black face? Can Scots do so without seeing a 'poor' person?

It has been nearly ten years since the Houchin report came out, and it would be an interesting exercise to update its findings. Its killer stat was heavily covered in the media and has had wide influence since then, showing the power of capturing a hidden social reality in a quotable statistical fact. Houchin also found that 269 local council wards, or areas covering a population of over 800,000 people, sent no one to prison. Maybe this is the killer stat we should be publicising and explaining.

Green, Duncan (2012) 'How to write Killer Facts and Graphics – what are your best examples?' Oxfam Blogs, 21 June 2012, online: <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-to-write-killer-facts-and-graphics-what-are-your-best-examples/> [accessed on 1 May 2014].

Houchin, R. (2005) Social Exclusion and Imprisonment in Scotland - A Report, report to the Scottish Prison Service.

MacAskill, K. (2007) 'Debate on Penal Policy', speech to the Scottish Parliament, 20 September, online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Review/spc/About/Review/penalpolicy>

Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) <http://www.esytc.ed.ac.uk/>

Male imprisonment rate (per 10,000 men) against average SIMD score for LA wards

