

Much Ado About Nothing

Fear of crime reaches even to areas of the country with comparatively low crime rates. Steve Taylor surveyed public attitudes in Stratford upon Avon.

I recently conducted a snapshot survey of crime in Stratford upon Avon, consisting of questionnaires sent to two hundred properties selected to match the local demography. The addresses for this survey all fell within three miles of Stratford town centre. An excellent response rate of 72 per cent was achieved.

Stratford upon Avon district covers a large area in the south of Warwickshire, and includes a number of small towns and literally hundreds of villages and hamlets. The population stands at something close to 116,000 living in 49,000 households. Warwickshire as a whole has some 935 police officers (Warwickshire Police 2002), or one for every 543 residents.

My questionnaire asked about the respondent's experience of crime, and perceptions of crime and justice in the area. The results were interesting: respondents appeared to understand the causes of certain types of crime, but were then punitive in their suggested responses.

Residents appear to fear crime out of all proportion to the likelihood of becoming a victim, and yet appear unconcerned about the forms of crime of which they are most likely to become a victim.

Sixty-one per cent of respondents felt that youth crime was 'a significant problem' in Stratford. When then asked to identify the most common forms of criminal behaviour, 73 per cent indicated that the biggest problem was youths hanging around on streets, playing on skateboards, and swearing. Ninety-two per cent agreed with the statement that "there is nothing for young people to do in this town", but some 30 per cent agreed that an evening curfew should be imposed on young people, and 18 per cent felt that the 'problem' was caused by bad parenting.

Burglary appears to be the type of crime most feared by Stratford residents. One house, well known to local residents, was burgled some five years ago, since when the owner has displayed posters at the front of his home calling for Draconian forms of punishment. Some 52 per cent of respondents said that they were 'very' worried about being burgled, and a further 24 per cent were 'quite' worried. This is despite a 15 per cent drop in recorded burglaries in the area.

Of little concern is violent crime, which Home Office statistics show to have increased by some 48 per cent (This figure includes larger conurbations such as Coventry, and may not reflect accurately an increase in the Stratford upon Avon district. Only eight per cent of respondents were 'very' concerned about violent crime, and a further 16 per cent were 'quite' worried. Stratford's first homicide for six years took place last year, and a further murder in the Stratford district in July this year may increase fears somewhat.

Eighty-two per cent of respondents felt that drugs were a 'significant problem' in the town. Of these, 62 per cent

acknowledged the lack of treatment facilities and counselling, but 48 per cent suggested that immediate custodial sentences would be the response most likely to help those with drug related problems.

Seventy-six per cent of respondents said that they 'always' read the 'In Court' column of the local newspaper. Further, three or four 'criminal families' are well known to almost all locals, and their names appear regularly in the local newspapers. Whilst my questionnaire did not give specific names, the allusion to 'criminal families' was enough for several respondents to mention family names. When asked what should be done about 'criminal families', no respondent suggested help or assistance - but 46 per cent said that they should be forced to move from the area.

Millions of tourists come to Stratford upon Avon each year, many from the US and Japan. When asked about the proportion

of crime committed annually by visitors to the town, respondents' opinions varied from one per cent to 46 per cent, with the average figure being 38 per cent. The police do not compile statistics on the actual levels of visitor crime. When asked about the police, almost three-quarters felt that they did 'a good job', and only eight per cent felt that the police's service was 'poor'. Interestingly, six respondents commented that they felt the regular broadsides from the Stratford MP, John Maples, were 'grossly unfair' and 'unhelpful'.

Stratford upon Avon is a small town in the heart of rural 'middle England'. Residents appear to fear crime out of all proportion to the likelihood of becoming a victim, and yet appear unconcerned about the forms of crime of which they are most likely to become a victim. My respondents showed understanding and appreciation of the causes of some crime, but were extraordinarily punitive in their suggested responses.

Steve Taylor is a postgraduate student at the University of Central England, and occasional writer on criminal justice issues. Further information can be obtained at the Stratford upon Avon Crime Survey website at www.sonacs.org.uk.

References:

Simmons, Jon (2002); *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002*; London, Home Office

Warwickshire Police (2002); *Achievement Report 2000/01*; Warwick, Warwickshire Police Service.