Things can only get better

Tim Hope questions the evidence in evidence-based policy making.

We did not want to enquire too closely when the Government announced its support for 'evidence-based' policy-making. After the long years of having criminological research ignored, under-valued and under-funded by the Conservatives, we were not inclined to be picky. So, like drifting mariners, many of us succumbed to the siren call of the Home Office for independent evaluation of its Crime Reduction Programme. I like to think we had some honourable motives: a desire to support the application of knowledge to social progress, certainly. But it was with sadness and regret that I saw our work ill-used and our faith in government's use of evidence traduced. Yet, though I have been sorely tempted at times, I do not want to pin the blame entirely on the mendacity of political culture, or the self-interests of the various coteries who swarm around politics (Hope, 2004). In many ways, I do not think either politicians or their advisers could help themselves resist temptation. Rather, the blame lies with an incompatibility between the ideology of evidence-based policy and the natural inclination of the political process to want to secure the best outcomes. Given the power of politics, it is not rocket science to predict what will happen when evidence gets in the way of good policy.

The best odds for the trapped administrator are where you can get away with capitalising on chance: for instance, the greater chance that if the probability of something is already declining over time it will continue to do so rather than abruptly change direction; or the phenomenon of 'regression toward the mean' (RTM) - that if something observed at one time is extreme, it is more likely the next time to be less rather than more extreme, and vice versa (Yudkin and Stratton, 1996). This is especially likely to be so when, truthfully, you have little understanding of the underlying causes of a problem that makes its trend go up or down or vary from place to place, and so you are unable to make an honest prediction of 'what works', especially for whom, and in what circumstances. The best bet, as Campbell put it, is to pick 'the very worst year, and the very worst social unit...there is nowhere to go but up, for the average case at least' (Campbell, 1978, p. 87).

The coincidence between statistical artefact and the promises of the trapped administrator is unfortunate: even if you don't understand (or even care) what causes a crime rate to vary, let alone understand RTM and other statistical obscurities, as a politician you are more likely to be tempted to select the evidence that appears to support your belief than that which contradicts it. And if you are at pains to protect simple, honest folk from the black arts of research methodology - after all, practitioners don't want to be confused by the ifs and buts of research, they want to get on with job, don't they? - then, conveniently, neither they nor anybody else is going to be able to contradict your own desire to present evidence in the best possible light. Indeed, you may even dupe yourself.

Various evaluation research methodologies have emerged over the years to overcome or discount effects due merely to statistical artefact, including experimentation and regression-based statistical analysis. Yet the risks of erroneous inference due to selective and artefactual bias inherent in seemingly simpler research analyses continue to be ignored (see Hope, 2002). By way of illustration, take the results of two local projects from my research consortium's own evaluation of part of the Home Office Reducing Burglary Initiative -- Phase 1, contained in Table 1 (for further information see: Hope, 2004; Hope et al., 2004).

Recorded burglary offences almost halved during the course of Project A3, while they increased by 14 per cent in the Project C7 area (column A). We employed a regression-based, time-series statistical method to estimate the proportion of change...
Table 1

Impact of two local burglary prevention projects on burglary (percentage change) (see Hope, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A Change in the target area</th>
<th>B Change due to project (modelled)</th>
<th>C Change due to 'other things' (A-B)</th>
<th>D Change in the rest of the BCU</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project A3</td>
<td>-47</td>
<td>-37</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project C7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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since the catch in RTM is that reductions towards the mean are compensated in similar magnitudes by increases.

We shall have to wait and see whether the performance data released publicly allows us to assess whether any real, rather than artefactual, reductions in crime have occurred. But when I say ‘us’ I don’t mean the electorate, of course. For most citizens, everyday life is increasingly resembling a lottery. By the same token, supporting government policies these days is like taking a trip to the betting-shop. But if that is the way we are to be governed, do we not have a right not only to know how to calculate the odds but also whether to trust the bookmaker? And are criminologists becoming merely the tipsters of the new crime reduction sweepstakes?

Tim Hope is writing in his capacity as Professor of Criminology at Keele University. The views expressed here do not reflect necessarily other commissions in which he is engaged currently.

References

12 July 2004 (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_sr04_psaindex.cfm).