

'Transparency', opacity, or concealing the evidence? The rise and rise of evidence-free policymaking

Ann Scott¹

There has been a disturbing theme in articles I have read recently about reduced statistical services under both the Federal and Queensland governments. For example, 'The death of evidence in education policymaking', <https://theconversation.com/the-death-of-evidence-in-education-policy-27505?>; 'Did the health reform process fail? Now we'll never know', <https://theconversation.com/did-the-health-reform-process-fail-now-well-never-know-27921>, or the media release by Australian Bureau of Statistics: 'The ABS must reduce expenditure by about \$50m over three years. While the ABS has been able to implement efficiencies in its operations, these are insufficient to meet the expenditure target. As a result, the statistical work program will be reduced from 2014-15.' <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyCatalogue/745695D9AEBEFE64CA257CEE0004715C?Opendocument>

Queensland Premier Campbell Newman's introduction to his Government's open data site reads:

Queensland is a great state with great opportunity. This government is committed to opening up more opportunities through the open data revolution.

and elsewhere:

As custodians of community information, we will release government-held information unless we think releasing it is not in the public interest.

There is a bizarre contradiction between the resources being devoted to increasing the amount and availability of data being collected (indeed a Google site allows one to interrogate crime data by location in fine detail <http://www.crimemap.info>) and the staff cutbacks in the agencies with the competence to interpret them. We had a recent example of this problem when the Queensland Attorney General claimed, in an ABC radio interview with Steve Austin (5 June 2014) that as a result of the LNP Government's war against the bikies Queensland 'We have seen a reduction in crime, in most areas in Queensland, between 20 and 50 per cent ... the sharpest decline ... across the state in recorded history'. When Steve Austin pressed the Attorney General about which data he had used upon which to base his claim, Mr Bleijie said it had been gathered from previous government statements.

One could, for once, feel mildly sympathetic towards our Queensland Attorney-General, once he had made his heroic claim, as he floundered under Steve Austin's probing questions about crime statistics. Crime statistics remain a minefield for the unwary.

¹ Adjunct Professor Ann Scott, PSM PhD, was a public servant for 20 years serving in a number of central and line agencies before retiring as Director of the Office of the Commissioner, Queensland Police Service, in 2004. She has since authored books and articles, including a biography of the 20th century British civil servant: Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds (in the 'Understanding Governance' series, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). She is currently Research Coordinator for the TJRyan Foundation.

I decided to have a look at the statewide figures, only to be frustrated because the most trustworthy source, providing long-term trends, is no longer published. For the ten years that I worked in the Queensland Police Service (QPS) I worked closely with its Statistical Services Unit in the lead-up to publishing the two annual publications: the *Annual Report* and its accompanying *Statistical Review*. Since the election of the Newman Government the QPS *Annual Statistical Review* is no more. However, Queensland boasts an Open Data Strategy and raw crime statistics are accessible to all. If you can work out how to use them. Easy to find, but hard to convert into reports that make any sense, and even harder to interpret. Even if generating reports was made easier, there are other serious problems with simply providing the data. To paraphrase the Explanatory Notes in the last QPS *Annual Statistical Review* (2011-12), the interpretation of police crime statistics is not a simple task. Before they can become a useful tool, it is essential to understand the conventions underlying each statistical collection and the various external variables which may affect them, including the procedures used in their compilation and collation, the definitions and rules followed in producing them and the social and environmental influences that affect the statistics - such as crime reporting. This was why the Police Service made every effort to maintain integrity and accuracy in their crime statistics and published the *Annual Statistical Review* as its official, comprehensible, public record of statistics on police, crime and related matters.

All the tables in the *Statistical Review* were accompanied by explanatory notes, such as a discussion about the level of reporting by the community, explaining that this depended on a member of the public understanding what might or might not be a reportable crime, and their level of confidence about reporting.

Policing priorities also affect the statistics. An expansion of the Drug Squad, for example, may result in more drug offences being detected rather than a rise in the actual offences. There are other traps for the unwary. I recall one classic headline in the Courier-Mail about a fearful outbreak of child sexual abuse in a small country centre in Queensland. The reporter had not read the explanation in the *Statistical Review* that for cases in which someone eventually had the courage to report a history of being sexually abused by a single perpetrator in incidents that took place over many years, all the offences were recorded in the police statistics on the day on which they were reported, not on the dates on which they allegedly occurred. Hence the 'spike' in the statistics. It was a bad case, but not a bad year. A graph showing 'unreported crime' was frequently queried. This was based on a Crime Victims Survey that asked people whether they had been a crime victim, and whether they had reported the crime. The purpose was to develop strategies to encourage people to feel confident about reporting crimes (domestic violence or sexual abuse, for example). But then, if confidence increased, so did the reported crime rate. Quoting percentage changes sounds good, but means more if you know whether you are talking about statistics involving 1000s, 100s, or fewer. A 50% drop from two cases is very different from a 50% drop from 100 cases. Removing police from across the State to concentrate on one geographic area or major event, say the Gold Coast bikie crackdown or the G20, might or might not cause a lift in crime elsewhere.

The *Statistical Review* also pointed out that police statistics could be understood even better when compared with other types of research. This was often carried out by other institutions such as the Crime and Misconduct Commission or the Canberra-based Institute of Criminology.

In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of crime, QPS crime statistics should be examined in conjunction with information from other sources such as Victims of Crime surveys and criminological research.

In the past, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC), and its predecessor, the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) conducted extremely valuable, independent research. Under the *Crime and Misconduct Commission Act 2014*, the CMC now has to submit an annual research plan to the Attorney-General for approval. This move, combined with the cessation of the QPS *Statistical Review* is a cause for concern, particularly when governments like to enhance their electoral appeal by pressing the 'law and order' hot button for electoral benefit. A politician is unlikely to risk research that might demonstrate their policy has not worked. Claims about winning the war against bikies, drugs or teenage parties need to be properly tested. The electorate deserves reliable evidence that supports the policies of their elected representatives.

One valuable piece of research that was undertaken by the then CJC in 2005 was a project measuring the amount of police time taken on particular activities. From this it emerged that attending domestic violence incidents took a far greater proportion of time than any other reported crime, and the CJC recommended strategies for managing these incidents. It was an example of research that helped improve police management, as did one of the most memorable graphs that was shown at a meeting of the police Senior Executive Conference which showed the road trauma statistics over time, overlaid with the dates of different initiatives taken to combat the road toll, such as the introduction of random breath-testing, mandatory seat-belts, and changes in speed limits. This provided a potent visual demonstration of the impact of road safety initiatives on the road toll. Perhaps it should have been converted into a public advertisement to counter the ridiculous games some radio stations played in warning motorists where speed traps or random breath tests were operating each day.

Evidence-based policing has progressed strongly as the evidence has become available. Dumbing down, or making the evidence less accessible to the community, is a loss to us all. It is ironic that governments have an ever-increasing potential to use parallel statistics across services to monitor the effectiveness of their interventions. This was attempted after the 2001 Cape York Justice Study recommended that alcohol management plans should be negotiated with the Cape communities. The Goss Government introduced a regime in which a range of measures were introduced to measure the impact, including crime statistics (particularly domestic violence), school truancy, and health. The Queensland Police Records and Information Management Exchange (QPRIME) now collects better data than ever before. This can be matched with Health, Emergency Services, Corrections, and other data sources to provide a broader perspective using figures from across multiple agencies. We can only hope that statisticians are available to use these resources, and provide the community with reports of substance and validity. The information seems remarkably hard to find at the moment. Looking at a group of measures together helps to counter the risk of the 'deadly parallel' - a graph line with a correlation between two trends that implies a direct cause and effect where none exists.

Giving governments the tools that enable them to do their job better is what a strong public service exists for. Research units and policy units (that used the research) were among the first to suffer from the cuts across the Queensland public sector since 2012 (now being replicated by the Abbott Government). We need strong evidence to underpin good public policy. The Attorney-General might not have been so tongue-tied had he had an up-to-

date QPS *Statistical Review*. A competent public servant could have provided him with a reliable briefing paper.

Voters might like to be able to judge for themselves from published statistics what is actually happening. Did the Labor Party let crime get out of control in Queensland? We can only judge the full story if we are provided with the statewide trends across all the statistics that were published in the *Statistical Review* - brought up-to-date to include the period since the 2011-12 edition, and annotated by the statisticians who understand them best. Perhaps the LNP does not want anyone to know? One TJRyan Research Associate put this quite bluntly: 'There is clearly a concerted, even if not co-ordinated, equivalent of "the burning of the books" afoot i.e. deliberate destruction of sources of key data on which evidence-based policy making could be based, in favour of (right wing) belief-based policy making (or faith-based, as in faith in one's own beliefs).

Or is the contraction in reliable published evidence an unintended consequence of public service cuts? Whatever the cause, the effect in this case has been to squander the intellectual capital held within in our public services - and does a great disservice to the Queensland community.