

0 The Sourcebook Project: General Introduction

0.1 Background

1. The assessment of trends in crime and criminal justice has been a permanent concern of the European Committee on Crime Problems (CDPC). Periodic events, such as criminological and penological conferences and colloquia and, in particular, the quinquennial *Conferences on Crime Policy* have been set up to keep those trends under permanent review and to provide those responsible for tackling crime and running criminal justice institutions with appropriate up to date information.

2. Due to ongoing developments in Greater Europe and the ensuing enlargement of the membership of the Council of Europe, the necessity for such periodic assessment and comparison in the above mentioned areas had become even more apparent.

3. Against this background, the CDPC created in 1993 a Group of Specialists on “*Trends in crime and criminal justice: statistics and other quantitative data on crime and criminal justice system*” (PC-S-ST), which was composed of experts from France, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom¹.

4. During a relatively short period of time, a great number of theoretical and technical issues were addressed (such as data comparison, offences to be considered and their definitions, appropriate table formats, statistical routines including counting rules in the various countries, interpretation of the available data, infrastructure needed for a full implementation of the Sourcebook Project etc.).

5. In 1995, the Group presented the *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics. Draft model* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1995, 194 pp) to the CDPC. The Draft model presented crime and criminal justice data for twelve European countries in 1990. Extensive technical comments were added to the tables in order to document the many methodological problems involved in international data collections. It was stated that: “Having found a practical and satisfactory way of handling the difficult problem of varying offence definitions and counting rules, the Group reached the conclusion that a European Sourcebook on crime and criminal justice statistics [was] indeed feasible.” (op. cit., p. 190).

6. Thus, at its 45th plenary session in June 1996, the CDPC entrusted the Group of Specialists with preparing a compendium of crime and criminal justice data for the whole of Europe. The final document should represent an enlarged version of the already existing Model Sourcebook covering, if possible, the total membership of the Council of Europe and presenting crime and criminal justice data for the years 1990 to 1996. The Group was

¹ The members of the Group were: Martin Killias (Switzerland), Chairman of the Group, Gordon Barclay (United Kingdom), Hanns von Hofer (Sweden), Imre Kertesz (Hungary), Max Kommer (Netherlands), Jörg-Martin Jehle (Germany), Chris Lewis (United Kingdom), Pierre Tournier (France). HEUNI was represented as an Observer (Kristiina Kangaspunta). Secretary to the Group: Wolfgang Rau, Directorate of Legal Affairs, Council of Europe.

enlarged by additional specialists in the collection of statistical data and members were given responsibilities as “regional co-ordinators”.²

7. In its work, the Group took account of the periodic surveys carried out by the UN and INTERPOL. These surveys relied on the provision of data by national sources who were asked to follow standard definitions. This approach contrasted with the Group’s adopted methodology, where a co-ordinated network of national correspondents provided data from current statistical sources within each country. This data was then supplemented by the collection of information on statistical and legal definitions. The Group, which included several members involved in recent UN surveys, felt that this approach would allow more comprehensive and accurate data to be produced.

8. The system of national correspondents required that each country should have one person responsible for the collection and initial checking of the data. Each correspondent would be an expert in crime and criminal justice statistics and act as a helpline. They would also be entrusted with checking their country’s reply to ensure good quality data.

9. The list of national correspondents was endorsed by the CDPC. The national correspondents had full responsibility for the accuracy of the data provided by their respective countries. A group of three or four national correspondents were ‘coached’ by each member of the Enlarged Group in their capacity as ‘regional co-ordinators’.

10. The revised formal questionnaire was finalised in the summer of 1997, in both official languages of the Council of Europe. Completed questionnaires were received from 36 countries (including England & Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

11. The data was checked and corrected mainly during the second half of 1997 and the first half of 1998. The data collected was put into a database that was set up by the *Institut de police scientifique et de criminologie (IPSC)* of Lausanne University during the summer and autumn of 1998.³ The data in paper format was then returned to the regional co-ordinators for checking in co-operation with the national correspondents (for further details please refer to the section on *Validation*). The present report was drafted during spring 1999.

0.2 Offence definitions

12. Comparative criminology has to face the problem of national offence definitions which are often incompatible. The Group adopted the following procedure: For all offences included in the Sourcebook, a standard definition was used and countries were invited to follow the standard definition where possible. Offence definitions and related commentaries are given in Appendix II to this chapter providing for each of the selected offences:

- the standard definition,

² The new members of the Enlarged Group of Specialists were: Marcelo Aebi (Switzerland), Andri Ahven (Estonia), Uberto Gatti (Italy), Zdenek Karabec (Czech Republic), Vlado Kambovski (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Alberto Laguia Arrazola (Spain) and Calliope Spinellis (Greece). Paul Smit (Netherlands) and Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay (France) joined the Group in December 1997 and April 1998 respectively.

³ The database was developed by Mr Marcelo Aebi, who produced the tables presented in the Sourcebook. They were devised in Excel and SPSS for Macintosh.

- a list of those countries which were not able to meet entirely this definition with an indication of which elements of the definition they were unable to meet. Countries not listed were able to fully conform to the standard definition.

0.3 The Structure of the Sourcebook

13. Although the aim of the Sourcebook Project was to collect data for the 1990-1996 period it was clear that this would put too heavy an administrative burden on countries. The data was therefore divided into:

- Key items: crimes, suspects and convictions (selected offences only).
- Non-key items: number of juveniles, women, aliens and sanctions/measures for selected offences. Resources, prison capacity.

14. The data for 1990-1996 was collected for key items. Data for 1995 only was collected for non-key items (the 1996 data was not available in many countries at this time). It was clearly a difficult decision to exclude time series data for sanctions/measures; however the Group felt that this decision was sensible as the many legal and administrative changes in Central and Eastern European countries rendered comparisons extremely difficult, in particular for the early 1990's.

15. Each chapter is subdivided into four sections:

- A. General comments
- B. Tables
- C. Technical information
- D. Sources

16. The Sourcebook is divided into five chapters:

I. *Police data* (offences and offenders [suspects] known to the police; police staff and expenditure). This chapter provides information on the volume of crime and the number of suspected offenders in each country. Most of the data is available as time series data for 1990-1996.

The selected offences focus almost exclusively (except for drug offences) on so-called *traditional* crimes. *Modern* crimes such as those relating to organised crime are not covered. The offences were:

- 1. Homicide
 - of which* completed homicide (according to police and vital statistics)
- 2. Assault
- 3. Rape
- 4. Robbery
 - of which* armed robbery
- 5. Theft
 - of which* theft of motor vehicle

- of which* bicycle theft
- of which* burglary
- of which* domestic burglary
- 6. Drug offences
 - of which* drug trafficking
 - of which* serious drug trafficking

II. *Prosecution statistics.* The chapter deals with the outcome of procedures at public prosecutor's level (prosecutors/investigative judges) during the years 1990-1996. It also provides data on the staff of the prosecuting authorities in 1995. Unlike most other tables in the Sourcebook, this chapter was not limited to specific types of offences, but covers *all offences* dealt with by the prosecuting authorities.

III. *Conviction statistics.* The tables in this chapter concern persons who have been convicted, i.e. found guilty according to law, of having committed one of the selected offences. Information is presented by offence (1990-1996); the sex, age group, and nationality of the offender (1995); the type of sanctions imposed as well as the duration of unsuspended custodial sentences (1995). Sanctions were grouped under the following categories:

1. Fines
2. Non-custodial sanctions and measures
3. Suspended custodial sanctions and measures
4. Unsuspended custodial sentences
5. Death penalty

IV. *Correctional statistics.* The chapter contains data on prison populations (1990-1997) stemming from the *Annual Penal Statistics of the Council of Europe* (SPACE) and from the Sourcebook questionnaire; the number of penal institutions (1995); expenditure related to the prison service and persons under the supervision or care of the correctional services (1990-1996). The chapter also contains a summary of information available on reconviction studies.

V. *Survey data.* The chapter presents data from international victimisation surveys on crimes against individuals.

0.4 Methodological issues

0.4.1 Data recording methods

17. Since the timing and method of recording can have a considerable impact on a statistical measure the Group paid much attention to the way in which national data were collected and recorded, and what operational definitions were applied at the several stages of the criminal justice process. Detailed information provided on this has been summarised in the form of tables and short comments.

0.4.2 Validation

18. Validation is often the most important and in many cases the most forgotten stage of the data collection process. As a first step, the Group identified and discussed obvious problems

relating to this process. It then produced a series of check-tables to assist further validation. The function of these tables was:

- I. To check whether individual cells added up to the totals given in the tables. It turned out that this was not always the case.
- II. To compare figures and to ensure that they were consistent throughout the replies to the Sourcebook questionnaire. It had to be checked, for example, whether the number of persons sentenced to unsuspended custodial sentences was compatible with the figure contained in the sentence length tables.
- III. To calculate rates per 100,000 population for the key items and to check for 'outliers', i.e. extreme values which are difficult, if not impossible, to explain.
- IV. To look at the attrition process of recorded offences, suspects, convictions and imprisonment; to recheck 'outliers' assuming that, starting with recorded crime (on an offence basis), the number of suspects (person's basis) will be lower and the number of convictions leading to an unsuspended custodial sentence will be lower still.
- V. To compare the proportion of juveniles, women and aliens in the tables for the number of suspects and convictions. Did these proportions make sense (80 per cent juvenile suspects would seem out of proportion) and were they consistent with other relevant figures?

19. This procedure resulted in the need to go back to many national correspondents for clarification and additional cross-checking. Although some errors were made when completing the questionnaire, it became apparent that the survey had identified many differences in national systems of criminal justice statistics, which had not become apparent in the previous Model Sourcebook. Part of this was due to the problems of language, as several national correspondents had to translate the questionnaire into their respective national languages and, in doing so, altered the definition of the information required. Other problems were related to the different criminal justice processes in the countries concerned. It is important to note that:

- I. in several countries serious cases (eg homicide) entered the criminal justice process at public prosecutor's level and were therefore not reflected in the police statistics.
- II. the items of the Sourcebook questionnaire concerning prosecution statistics failed to fully identify what happened to cases that did not reach the court.
- III. there was a general problem with homicide statistics, namely whether the figures collected represented those initially or finally recorded as homicides.
- IV. when is a vehicle said to have been stolen? It was important to ensure that if a vehicle was recovered the offence was still included.
- V. the inclusion of fines by the prosecutor in the sentencing tables (i.e. sanctions/measures) was not always possible since a breakdown by offence

was not always available. In addition, the sentencing tables often combined data from more than one source and were therefore likely to include double-counts.

VI. the different ways in which countries handled juvenile offenders led to inconsistencies as to whether they were included or not in every table.

20. In some cases it was possible to correct the data, whilst in others more or less detailed explanations had to be given. *However, despite the considerable efforts made by the Group to detect errors and inconsistencies in the data, not all of these might have been identified; nor was it possible to deal with all errors and inconsistencies in a fully satisfactory way.*

0.5 Presentational details

21. In order to increase the clarity of the present report, the Group took the following practical decisions, namely

- I. To make *all* raw data and *all* comments available in a separate document through the Council of Europe (“Basic tables and commentaries”)⁴. Thus, the present document contains only a selection of all the data and commentaries submitted.
- II. To eliminate all tables where the number of reporting countries was less than ten (with the exception of the tables concerning serious drug trafficking in Chapter I).
- III. To use decimals sparingly so as to avoid the impression of false precision.
- IV. To use the following symbols throughout the tables:
 - a) “0” to indicate a number between 0 and 0.4;
 - b) “...” to indicate that data is not (yet) available or that the question / concept as used in the Sourcebook questionnaire does not apply;
 - c) “> 1000” to indicate that the percentage change between 1990 and 1996 is above one thousand per cent.
- V. to condense the vast amount of technical information on definitions, data collection methods, processing rules etc. into clearly arranged summary tables, listings and footnotes.
- VI. whenever possible and reasonable, figures were transformed into rates per 100,000 population or indicated as percentages. The population figures used are contained in the appendix to this introduction.
- VII. national currencies were converted into ECU. The respective exchange rates are contained in the appendix to this introduction.

⁴ Available on request from the Division of Crime Problems, Directorate of Legal Affairs, Council of Europe, F – 67075 Strasbourg CEDEX.

VIII. to use the following measures throughout the tables to provide information on the data's dispersion:

a) Mean: The arithmetic average; the sum of scores divided by the number of countries that provided data. The value of the mean is sensitive to the presence of very high or very low scores. For this reason the median was also included as an indicator of the central tendency of the data.

b) Median: The median was the score that divides the distribution of scores into two exact halves

c) Minimum: The lowest score in the table.

d) Maximum: The highest score in the table.

e) Percentage change 1990-96 (based upon unrounded scores whenever possible).

0.6 Comparability

22. The basic aim of the Sourcebook data collection was to present comparable information on crime and criminal justice statistics in Europe. However, the issue of whether or not it is feasible to use official criminal justice statistics for decision-making in crime policy or for conducting scientific studies is one of the classic debates of criminology. The problems involved are even more serious when it comes to international comparisons, because nations differ widely in the way they organise their police and court systems, the way they define their legal concepts, and the way they collect and present their statistics. In fact, the lack of uniform definitions of offences, of common measuring instruments and of common methodology makes comparisons between countries extremely hazardous. This is the reason why criminologists in recent years have developed alternatives to complement the existing official statistics: international comparative *victimisation* studies on the one hand and international comparative *self-report* studies on the other (see Chapter 5).

23. There can be no doubt that international comparisons based on official statistics give rise to delicate problems. The Fifth Criminological Colloquium of the Council of Europe in the beginning of the 1980's was exclusively devoted to these issues. The question, however, whether official data can be used or not, cannot be answered once and for all. The answer is *empirical* in nature. Thus, the intended use of the data should determine whether or not the data is suitable as a basis for analysis.

24. Comparative analyses generally fall into one of three categories: (I) distributive comparisons, (II) level comparisons and, (III) trend comparisons.

I. *Distributive* comparisons are aimed at answering questions such as: Do theft offences dominate the crime picture in most countries? What is the age profile of sentenced offenders in the various countries?

II. Relevant questions for *level* comparisons are of the following type: Which country reports the highest robbery rate? Which countries show low rates of incarcerated offenders?

III. In contrast, interpretations of *trends* deal with such questions as: did the increase in rape offences differ over time in various countries? Did the number of community sentences increase in all countries between 1990 - 1996?

25. Before these and other questions can be answered, it should be noted that official crime and criminal justice statistics are fundamentally dependent upon three sets of circumstances: (i) *actual circumstances* such as the propensity of individuals to commit crimes, the opportunity structure, the risk of detection, the willingness of the public to report crimes, the efficiency of criminal justice authorities; (ii) *legal circumstances* such as the design of the Criminal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and other relevant legislation; the formal organisation of criminal justice agencies and the informal application of the law in everyday life; and (iii) *statistical circumstances* such as the formal data collection and processing rules and their practical implementation.

26. To ensure comparability when making *distribution* and *level* comparisons, one must carefully control the legal and statistical circumstances before concluding that similarities or dissimilarities can be taken as real. The demands are somewhat different when it comes to ascertaining crime *trends*. For such analyses, the "real" crime level does not need to be known; it is sufficient to control for possible changes to the legal and statistical systems. This is of course a difficult task, and identifying *informal* changes in criminal justice procedures and in statistical routines is especially difficult.

27. In order to facilitate the use of the data contained in this Sourcebook, comprehensive additional information concerning the definition of offences and sanctions, the data collection and processing rules was collected. This information is contained in section C of each chapter. More specifically, each table is accompanied by a list of questions intended to clarify the scope of data. For example, in some countries "assault" included legally and/or statistically not only "wounding" but also "causing bodily pain". Consequently, the latter will report a higher frequency of assault - *ceteris paribus*. By studying these specific questions carefully, it should be possible to identify those countries which tend to over-report (or to under-report) offence frequencies. However, it is not possible to easily quantify the extent to which over or under-reporting occurs.

0.7 Basic rules on how to use the statistical information contained in the Sourcebook

1. Do not use any figures from the Sourcebook without referring to the technical information provided in section C of each chapter.
2. Do not over-interpret relatively 'small' differences in the tables, especially between countries.
3. Do not over-interpret relatively 'large' differences in the tables, especially between countries.
4. Do not stress differences between individual countries too much. It is better to compare an individual country with a larger group of countries or with the average for all countries.
5. Whenever possible, avoid using the tables on police reported offences for 'level' comparisons between countries. Rather, they should be used for 'trend' comparisons.
6. Avoid interpreting 'large' variations from one year to another as evidence for changes in the measured phenomenon. Sudden increases or decreases are often merely indicative of modifications in the law or in the underlying statistical routines/counting rules.