

1 POLICE STATISTICS

1.A GENERAL COMMENTS

1.A.1 Background

1. This chapter provides information on offences recorded by the police, the number and some characteristics of suspected offenders, the number of police staff and expenditure related to police work.

1.A.1.1 Police statistics as a measure of crime

2. Although police statistics are collected by all countries they do not in themselves provide a good measure of crime. There are several reasons for that.

3. The first is, that victims may choose not to report the crime to the police or even may not be aware that they were a victim. There may be reasons for not reporting an offence: reporting may be self-incriminating (e.g., when the victim was in one way or another an offender at the same time) or humiliating; or the victim may think that nothing is to be gained by reporting (e.g., the victim expects the police not to be able to solve the burglary or return the stolen goods). Whatever the reason, if a victim did not report and the police did not learn about the offence from another source, the offence will not be recorded by the police and therefore not counted in police statistics. In criminological literature, the general opinion is that sexual offences and domestic violence, for example, tend to be underreported, while the reporting of property offences will depend on whether the property was insured or not.

4. Even when a crime is reported to the police, it might not be recorded in police statistics. There are many reasons why a reported crime is not recorded: the main one is that after initial inquiries the police think that the event reported did not actually constitute an offence.

5. In some circumstances the police may also know of a crime even if it was not reported to them by the victim or witness. This is sometimes the case with violent offences e.g. homicide (a dead body is found), and it is certainly the case with the so-called victimless offences (i.e., offences against rules and regulations, such as illegal possession of arms, drunken driving and most drug offences).

1.A.1.2 The position of the police in the criminal justice system

6. In addition to what was said in the previous paragraph, it is important to make three remarks on the position of the police in the criminal justice system, which might have an impact on the number of offences recorded and the number of police staff and expenditure.

7. Although in most countries the police can be regarded as the first stage of the criminal justice process, this does not mean that the figures on recorded crime given in this chapter of the Sourcebook give a complete impression of the total input to the criminal justice system. In a number of countries, the prosecuting authorities may initiate criminal proceedings without having received a police report. For example, in some of the Eastern European countries serious violent offences will not always be recorded by the police, but by the public prosecutor's office. Also in many countries, other agencies (military police, customs, border police, fiscal fraud squads) and individuals (foresters, judges, or even citizens) may have the power to initiate criminal proceedings by filing a complaint with the prosecution authorities or

the court. However, most of the offences covered by the Sourcebook – with the possible exception of drug offences – will be reported to / detected by the police.

8. The position of the police in the criminal justice system is not only relevant to the extent to which crime recorded at police level may be seen as a measure of the input into the criminal justice system. It may also directly influence the number of offences recorded and their classification. Firstly, in some countries the police may be quite independent in its activities, while in others they work under the close supervision of the prosecutor or the court. Secondly, the police may have the power to ‘label’ the incidents they investigate as specific offences, or they may have to leave this task to the prosecutor. This difference may also have consequences for the relative distribution of the various types of offences dealt with in the Sourcebook (see below).

9. When looking at police staff and expenditure, and especially when trying to relate these to the “output” of the police in terms of reported or recorded crime, it is important to note that there are large differences between countries in the tasks the police carry out. In some countries, these tasks are limited to dealing with criminal offences. In most countries the police deal with traffic offences like drunken driving, causing bodily harm or petty traffic offences (like speeding and illegal parking). Also, in most countries, the police have the additional task of maintaining public order and of assisting the public in different situations (from providing information to rendering first aid). This might not apply, however, to all types of police or related agencies, which have been included in the tables on police staff and expenditure. Therefore, care should be taken when relating police resources to the volume of recorded crime or the number of suspected offenders.

1.A.1.3 Counting offences and offenders

10. Apart from the classification problem - a dead body in the road is a dead body, but should it be recorded as a murder victim, a victim of assault, a victim of a parachuting accident or of natural death? – there are two other problems to be kept in mind when looking at police statistics. The first is the point in time at which the offence was recorded in the statistics. Was it following an initial report (“input” statistic) or subsequent to an initial investigation (“output” statistic)? The second is the so-called multiple offence problem: one offence can consist of several offences (e.g. rape, followed by a homicide and the use of an illegal weapon). It is important to know whether the offences committed were counted separately or whether a principal offence rule was applied (i.e. only counting the most serious offence). The third problem is that of serial or continuous offending. Is a gang rape counted as one rape or several? If a woman reports that her husband battered her on many occasions over a period of several weeks, does this represent one offence or several offences? What about somebody who operates a laboratory in which amphetamines are produced over a long period?

11. Similar problems arise in connection with the counting of offenders. In most countries, a person will only be considered as an offender if his or her guilt has been proven. However, such a conclusion is the end-result of a judicial process. Therefore, at police level it is common practice to speak of “suspects” or “suspected offenders”. This fact however introduces new problems: at what point in time, exactly, is it appropriate to record a person as a suspected offender? Here again, major differences between countries exist, where practices range from recording a person as a “suspected offender” as soon as the police are reasonably convinced that he or she was the offender (even though they may not have questioned him or her), to recording a person as a “suspect” only after the prosecutor has started criminal proceedings against him or her.

12. It was obviously beyond the reach of the Group to standardise counting rules or to harmonise offence definitions. Therefore, an attempt has been made to provide the user of the Sourcebook with information that might be helpful in correctly interpreting the data presented (see section 1.C).

1.A.1.4 Counting police officers and determining police expenditure

13. European countries organise their police systems in different ways. Most of them have more than one police force, e.g. State police, communal police, municipal police, gendarmerie or judicial police, all of which perform tasks in connection with the offences under consideration in this Sourcebook. In addition, there may also be special police forces or units which are less important in this context (e.g. tax and military police); the same might apply to certain categories of staff of the general police force (e.g. police reserves and cadet police officers).

14. Such differences should be kept in mind when comparing the number of police officers between countries. Therefore, we have asked the national correspondents to use a standard definition of “police officer” which would include criminal police, traffic police, border police, gendarmerie and uniformed police, but exclude customs police, tax police, military police, secret service police, part-time officers, police reserves and cadet police officers (see tables 1.C.3.1 – 1.C.3.2).

15. The differences in police organisation also make it difficult to determine police expenditure. Though in most countries there is a budget for the police at national level, there may be additional budgets at regional or local level. In addition, the different police forces in a country may be funded by several national sources. The Group was not in a position to overcome these difficulties; however, it was agreed to collect information on police expenditure, expecting that it would at least be able to give some indications as to the differences in the level of expenditure related to police work.

1.A.1.5 Comparisons with alternative statistical sources

16. In general, one of the best means for assessing the validity of data from a given source, is to compare it with data from other sources. For the statistics in this chapter, two alternative sources are available. The figures on completed homicide reported in police statistics were compared to data from vital statistics, as provided by the World Health Organisation (see table 1.A.1.3).

17. Data on other violent crimes and on property offences can be compared to the results of crime victimisation surveys. Relevant results are presented in Chapter 5.

18. Though comparisons are a way to validate data, the results must be interpreted with caution. In the present case, level-differences between police and victimisation data should be understood mainly as a consequence of the methods of collecting information used. However, if there are similar trends, these may well be understood as reflecting real changes in the level of crime.