

4 CORRECTIONAL STATISTICS

4.A GENERAL COMMENTS

1. Chapter 4 presents data on detention rates, number and capacity of penal institutions, expenditure related to the prison service and persons serving non-custodial sanctions and measures. It also reviews the information available on recidivism.

2. Table 4.B.1 indicates the detention rate for all countries for which such data is available (1990 – 1997). This data stems from the *Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics (SPACE)* collection. More detailed information on the SPACE system, its methodology and coverage is presented in section 4.C. The data presented hereafter shows wide variations in detention rates throughout Europe, with considerable differences between the ‘new’ and most of the ‘old’ member States of the Council of Europe. The highest detention rate in Europe can be found in Russia; very similar to that of the United States of America.

3. The other data presented comes almost exclusively from the Sourcebook questionnaire except for data on total prison capacity as contained in the first column of table 4.B.2.1 (“Number and capacity of penal institutions”). Tables 4.B.2.2 and 4.B.2.3 present data on the operational and capital costs relating to the prison service. This data too shows considerable variation throughout Europe, in particular as concerns the total capacity of prison systems, the size of penal institutions and the cost of corrections. However, it should be borne in mind that expenditure related to the prison service is not a very clear indicator. Depending on the countries concerned, it might reflect that imprisonment and the extension of the prison estate are important priorities of penal policy – but it might also simply point to great differences between countries as regards general living costs and the level of remuneration of correctional staff.

4. Table 4.B.3.1 provides information on trends in the number of persons serving a community sanction or measure (1990–1996). Details concerning the type of sanction/measure are contained in table 4.B.3.2 (1995 only). The data show not only wide variations across the countries, but also interesting trends. Generally speaking, the rate of persons serving a non-custodial sentence has increased less over the years considered than rates of detention (see tables 4.B.1 and 4.B.3.1), suggesting *inter alia* that the services entrusted with the implementation of community sanctions and measures may have developed less rapidly than the prison systems in most European countries.

5. At an earlier stage of its work, the Group also planned to present detailed quantitative information as produced by recidivism research throughout Europe. This objective, however, had to be abandoned, due to the many technical and methodological problems involved in this task. It was therefore agreed to present a brief account of some of the main methodological issues and to point out common features in the results which were available from reconviction studies. The main results are as follows.

Recidivism

6. Fifteen of the 36 countries covered by the Sourcebook quoted one or more studies on recidivism and 25 studies were reported in all. Most countries measure the extent to which offenders are reconvicted: some do this by defining the concept of a recidivist within their Penal Code and simply count such people; some countries rely on research studies to estimate reconviction rates of offenders; other countries have built up large databases of offender histories, which enable reconviction rates and criminal careers to be studied on a regular basis.

7. However, there is little standardisation between countries in the methodology used. In general, results are – among other things – dependent on

- how large the studied sample or population is
- the characteristics of the offenders (are all offenders chosen or only special sub-groups according to gender, age, prior convictions, type of offence, type of sanction etc.)
- the length of the follow-up period, and
- the definition of the event, which constitutes “recidivism” / “reconviction” (e.g. all offences or only special offences / sanctions meet the criterion of reconviction).

8. Indeed, choosing different offender characteristics, follow-up periods and recidivism criteria, it is possible to synthetically increase or decrease recidivism rates. Therefore, care should be taken in interpreting reconviction rates, even within one country, and special care should be taken when comparing rates across countries. Neither should it be forgotten that reconviction rates are in fact “rates of recapture” whilst recidivism rates may vary with the efficiency of the different criminal justice systems.

9. Nevertheless, there are some common features in the results which are available, although reconviction rates vary considerably in their magnitude between the countries:

- a. Past criminal history is the most important predictor of reconviction rates, with the highest rates being for offenders with the longest criminal history.
- b. Male reconviction rates are higher than those for females; however, this is mostly explained by differences in criminal history and age.
- c. Younger persons tend to have a higher reconviction risk than older persons.
- d. Reconviction rates are highest in the first year after the initial conviction / release.
- e. There is no simple relationship between the seriousness of the offence and reconviction.
- f. There is also no simple relationship between the first conviction offence and subsequent offences.
- g. There is no simple relationship between the type of sentence and the reconviction rate.