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**INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF CRIME STATISTICS: CURRENT PROGRESS  
AND MAIN ISSUES**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The measurement of crime and the comparison of crime levels between countries have been a topic of interest to policy makers for the last two hundred years. It was considered at the General Statistical Congress held in Brussels in 1853 and the International Congress on the Prevention and Repression of Crime held in London in 1872. A report to the Home Office on Criminal Statistics in 1892<sup>2</sup> recommended that:

The editor of the annual Home Office publication should '*draw attention to the returns of foreign countries; and thus edited, the reports would gradually prepare the way for a time when international comparisons should be made with safety*'.

However, because of concerns that such comparisons were not safe, it took the UK 100 years before it published any international comparisons<sup>3</sup> and these are still very limited in scope.

2. This paper looks only at crime with the advantage that most countries collect crime data. However, there are similar and often more difficult problems with prosecution, court and prison statistics and in many countries such data is not collected centrally.

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Gordon C. Barclay, Home Office.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Committee appointed to revise the Criminal portion of Judicial Statistics 12 December 1892.

<sup>3</sup> International comparisons of criminal justice statistics 2000 by Gordon Barclay and Cynthia Tavares, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 05/02.

## II. MEASUREMENT OF CRIME

3. Crime is a concept defined by a country or society and therefore there is no single international definition of what is a crime. In addition, many central recording systems restrict their recording to only serious crimes. Crime is commonly measured in two ways, firstly, through the measurement of crime as reported/recorded to the police and, secondly, by surveys of the public asking for their experiences of being the victim of a crime. Both measures have their limitations and their advocates.

4. **Police figures** represent the workload of the police but clearly they are affected by the rate at which crimes are reported to the police. For some crimes (e.g. drugs offences) the level of crime will reflect police activity. In addition, the measure will reflect both the legal system and the statistical rules used to collect such data, since:

- the definition of offences varies between countries. For instance, assault may just include a serious assault but can also cover a simple threat. Similarly, the definition of burglary will depend upon what is defined as your property (e.g. theft from a car may or may not be included);
  - the counting rules vary and can relate to either the number of victims or the number of incidents. Thus, a fight outside a bar could be one incident or several;
  - the point at which the information is recorded. For many countries this is the point in time at which the incident is reported to the police. However, in other countries it is the point in time when the case papers are sent to the prosecution authority;
- The organisation of police in a country. In some countries the presence of several police forces can lead to one offence being counted more than once, while other offences (for example, those taking place on a train) may not be in the published statistics at all.

5. **Victimisation surveys** are based upon interviews with either the head or all members of a household usually excluding children under 16 years. It will therefore include offences neither reported to or recorded by the police. However, it will exclude victimless crimes (e.g. drugs offences) and those involving businesses (e.g. fraud). Due to low sample sizes it is normally not possible to provide local data or to identify specific offences. However, such surveys also provide data on fear of crime and attitudes to the police, as well as providing data on the age/social/economic characteristics of the victim.

6. Many researchers feel that victimisation surveys are the only accurate measure of crime, while police forces consider police statistics a better measure. In reality, a dual approach can be seen as most effective in understanding crime.

## III. COLLECTION OF CRIME STATISTICS

7. The methods used and the collecting agencies for both police statistics and victimisation data vary widely between countries:

- few countries carry out regular victimisation surveys (the exceptions being England/Wales, Netherlands and Sweden), although several countries are now planning surveys (e.g. Germany and Ireland). Sample sizes and the type and order of questions differ providing only limited comparisons

- between countries. In addition, many countries have changed their methodology from year to year making time trends difficult;
- for police statistics, although the police are clearly the information collectors for recorded crime statistics, this information is collated centrally by units sometimes within the Central Bureau of Statistics (e.g. Netherlands), the police (e.g. France, Ireland) or staff within the relevant ministry (e.g. UK). Although many countries are now attempting to standardise the methods of collection between the different police forces in their country, this has still not been achieved. Countries also differ as to whether the information is collected on an incident by incident basis (e.g. Netherlands and France) or through a summary return (e.g. England/Wales). The level of aggregation of data varies between countries and, therefore, the possibility of identifying individual offences and the outcome of any investigation differs.

#### **IV. INTERNATIONAL SOURCES OF CRIME STATISTICS**

8. The current sources of international comparative criminal justice data are mainly based on collecting information from central recording systems, the exception being the International Crime Victimisation survey. All the methods described below have developed in a relatively ad hoc way being limited by resources and often being the product of a few enthusiastic individuals rather than centrally funded projects.

##### **United Nations Crime Survey**

9. This survey has been carried out by the United Nations every five years since 1977<sup>4</sup>. It includes the collection of police crime data for selected offences, defining these offences in a standard way, and aims to cover all Member States of the UN. In reality, the survey has suffered from poor quality and inconsistent data coupled with a lack of resources, so that data from the last two surveys have yet to be fully published. It also has not taken account of the wide differences in definitions and statistical rules between countries. Although recent attempts to use different data sources have improved quality, problems of definitions still remain.

##### **Interpol statistics**

10. Interpol regularly collect and publish police crime statistics<sup>5</sup>. However, the survey suffers the same problems of quality as the United Nations Survey.

##### **European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics**

11. This project started 10 years ago under the Council of Europe and it took forward the United Nations ideas by including the collection of metadata on the definition of offences and the statistical/legal system behind the statistics. It covers only Council of Europe Member States and it introduced much greater quality control by involving experts from each country and a system of regional coordinators under an expert Steering Committee. However, without dedicated resources progress is slow with

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<sup>4</sup> Global report on Crime and Justice, United Nations, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.interpol.int/Public/Statistics/ICS/Default.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Statistics/ICS/Default.asp)

currently data published for the period 1990-96<sup>6</sup> and a new publication extending this to 2000 completed but yet unpublished. Initially, the Council of Europe funded the project but it is now jointly funded by the Dutch, Swiss and UK Governments. A website<sup>7</sup> funded by the Dutch enables dissemination of the results.

### **International Crime Victimisation Survey (ICVS)**

12. Initially organised and funded by the Dutch but now under the United Nations, this survey aims to ask identical questions in participating countries on levels of victimisation. Surveys have been held in 1989, 1992, 1996 and 2000<sup>8</sup> with the next proposed for 2004. Sample size is usually 2000 for all countries, although in some cases the survey takes place only in cities or parts of a country (the last ICVS covered only a part of Spain i.e. Catalonia) as against a national sample. There have been some problems of countries adopting different methodologies and also with the translation of questions to ensure true comparability. Countries mainly fund their own surveys but the UN have applied this year for EU funding to cover current EU member funding for the 2004 survey.

### **Other sources**

13. The Home Office collects and publishes information on crime trends in 36 countries for selected offences (homicide, violence, robbery, domestic burglary, car theft and drug trafficking). Analysis is based upon trends rather than absolute comparisons. In addition, the EU has set up a subgroup under its Crime Prevention Network that is producing a report on crime in EU Member States. The EU is considering the need for comparative indicators on crime as part of its developing crime prevention strategy and included questions on crime in the recent Eurobarometer survey.

## **V. MAIN ISSUES ON COMPARATIVE CRIME STATISTICS**

14. Based upon current progress it is possible to identify a number of issues which need to be addressed:

### **Information needs**

15. The development of a clear specification of the central information needs in this area linked to Ministerial, operational and policy needs is important. Ministerial needs are one of the main drivers in England/Wales (e.g. recent comparisons between crime levels in New York and London). Developments in other statistical areas could help here.

### **Centralised resource**

16. There is currently no central unit that collects annual crime statistics for either EU or the wider Europe, including North American countries. The Home Office in the UK by default seems to occupy

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<sup>6</sup> European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 1999.

<sup>7</sup> [www.europeansourcebook.org](http://www.europeansourcebook.org)

<sup>8</sup> Criminal Victimisation in Seventeen Industrialised Countries, Dutch Ministry of Justice, 2000.

this role but clearly this is not an independent source. Possibly some role of Eurostat in this area may develop in the next few years by the EU but not immediately. This move will link to policy interest in the European Union.

### **Funding**

17. There are currently no funding arrangements that exist to cover measuring crime for the whole of Europe. They would need to cover staff for a central unit as well as surveys, such as the International Victimisation Survey, but needs to include the analysis and dissemination of results as well as survey design and interviewing. Western European countries see the need for Crime Surveys in their own countries (e.g. the sample of the British Crime Survey in England/Wales is now 40,000) and some countries (e.g. Netherlands) can assist in funding international surveys. The lack of centralised funding means that coverage for international surveys is often patchy.

### **Standards**

18. It would clearly be possible for a standard methodology to be adopted for carrying out victimisation surveys, although it would affect initially time series comparison. This should also include a series of identical core questions to enable international benchmarking. Country specific surveys would then be comparable, although clearly each country or international survey would wish to include questions on other topics.

However, for police crime statistics such an aim would be more difficult if not impossible to obtain. The U.S. have set up their Uniform Crime Reporting System to collect data from each State on an identical basis and a similar European system could be considered. However, this took some time to be introduced in the U.S. and the proposal ignores the wide differences that exist between European countries. Furthermore, statistical considerations are unlikely to change legal systems, which have existed for centuries. The option here would be better understanding of the differences to see whether closer comparative estimates are possible by the use of weightings.

### **Dissemination**

19. Poor presentation of crime statistics and victimisation surveys can at the least be misleading and more often liable to promote concern among the public. However, it is equally important that such information is widely available and disseminated both at a national and local level. Clear guidelines in this area need to be devised. If no guidelines exist others will fill the vacuum.

### **Who is responsible?**

20. This final issue reflects the spread of responsibility for crime statistics referred to earlier. Both the police and Government agencies are currently more likely to be responsible for collecting and disseminating crime statistics than statistical offices. In fact, many would argue that the former produce better quality data and certainly understand the figures better. Often this relates to whether crime

statistics are seen as a Central Government or police measure of performance. Such problems are associated with many areas of social statistics and are not unique to crime.

## **VI. SUMMARY**

21. The paper describes current progress on developing comparative measures of crime. It raises a number of the issues that need to be overcome before any progress can be made in this area. These include organisation, funding and standardisation. The conference will give an opportunity for others to consider these issues, weight their importance and identify other ones. Hopefully, publication of these conclusions will provoke further discussion.