



Trends in crime since 1997

Standard Note: SN/SG/5390
Last updated: 9 March 2010
Author: Gavin Berman
Section: Social and General Statistics

MPs are frequently asked by their constituents and the local media how crime levels have changed in their area. Often such enquiries relate to changes since 1997, when the current administration took office.

The Home Office's preferred source of crime statistics is the British Crime Survey as its methodology has not changed since it was introduced in 1981, but this only provides data at a national level. Data from the police recorded crime series is available for smaller geographical areas, such as police force area and local authority, but there have been changes to the way that these figures are collected meaning the published figures are not directly comparable between 1997 and now.

This note looks at both of these sources, briefly explaining their advantages and disadvantages. The note concludes by looking at possible adjustments that can be made to the recorded crime series to estimate trends since 1997 – and the limitations of such estimates.

Contents

1	Sources of crime data	2
1.1	British Crime Survey (BCS)	2
1.2	Police recorded crime series	2
2	What comparisons can be made?	4
3	Adjusting the recorded crime series.	5

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

1 Sources of crime data

The Home Office publishes two sets of crime statistics the British Crime Survey and the police recorded crime series. Neither of these will provide the true or total level of crime, but when used together can provide a more comprehensive picture of crime than using either series in isolation.

1.1 British Crime Survey (BCS)

The BCS is a face-to-face victimisation survey of the population resident in households in England and Wales. Until recently it has been restricted to adults aged 16 and over but from January 2009 the survey was extended to children aged 10 to 15. However, statistics from the BCS will continue to be restricted to adults until the first results from children are published on 17 June 2010. The BCS does not cover commercial crime, or those not part of the resident household population,¹ “victimless” crimes or sexual offences.²

The BCS carried out up to and including 2001 reported victimisation in the preceding calendar year.³ Since 2001/02 interviews have been conducted continuously throughout the year with respondents being asked about the crimes they experienced in the 12 months preceding the interview.

For the type of offences and victims it covers the BCS is said to be a better indicator of crime trends than the recorded crime series as its methodology has remained the same since the survey began in 1981. A major benefit of the BCS is that it includes crimes that are not reported to the police as well as those that are.

As the methodology and offence types have not been changed over the almost 30 year life of the BCS relatively new offences, such as credit card fraud or internet offences, are not included. Additional questions on these issues have been added to the survey in recent years and are reported separately to the main BCS count.

The primary purpose of the BCS is to provide national level data, although some headline information is available at a regional level. Most BCS data is not available at police force area or local authority level.

1.2 Police recorded crime series

Police recorded crime data is administrative data provided to the Home Office by each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales and since 2002/03 the British Transport Police. National level data from 1898 is available on the Home Office website.⁴

The major benefit of the recorded crime series is that the data is available at a more disaggregated offence level and smaller geographical area than the BCS.

However police recorded crime is not viewed as a reliable indicator of trends as the number of offences recorded can be affected by various factors.

¹ E.g. students in halls of residence, people in residential care, offenders in prison, members of the armed forces and rough sleepers. The institutional population is quite small – around 2% of the general population and thought to have little effect on the estimates. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/horr06c.pdf>

² Due to the small numbers of offences picked up by the main BCS, results are too unreliable to report. Respondents may not wish to disclose such sensitive information in the main interview and therefore the BCS questionnaires include additional self completion modules on sexual victimisation.

³ Interviews carried out in 2000, whether in January or December, would be asking about crime victimisation in 1999.

⁴ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/recorded-crime-1898-2002.xls>

Public reporting behaviour

Not all crimes that are committed come to the attention of the police. According to the BCS in 2008/09 the police were aware of 41% of BCS comparable crime.⁵ Reporting rates have remained generally stable over time, with some exceptions, although these rates are likely to vary considerably by type of offence.

Reporting rates are likely to be affected by variety of factors including faith in the police, views of the seriousness of the offence or the need to report for insurance purposes.

Police recording behaviour

Despite guidance to standardise the way that police forces record offences (such as the NCRS) it is very difficult to guarantee that every police officer will strictly adhere to this in each case.

This is highlighted in reports issued by the Audit Commission that have reviewed compliance with the NCRS. In 2003/04, 12 police forces (28%) had good or excellent crime data quality. In the most recent Audit Commission report the proportion of police forces with good or excellent crime data quality had risen to 88% in 2006/07.⁶

It is clear from this that police recording behaviour will have an effect on the recorded crime statistics.

Changes to legislation and counting methodology

There have been two major changes to police crime recording practices in recent years - the 1998 counting rule change and coverage revisions and the implementation in 2002 of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS).⁷

From 1 April 1998 detailed rules were provided for each offence which contained greater guidance on crime recording. The coverage of crimes to be counted was also increased to include all indictable and triable-either-way offences, together with some very closely linked summary offences. For example, drug possession and assault without injury, were included in the recorded crime figures for the first time in 1998.

The NCRS, which was introduced officially across all police forces in England and Wales from April 2002, provides police forces with guidance on the initial decision to record an incident as a crime. Some police forces had introduced these changes before April 2002. It aims to promote greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime and to take a more victim orientated approach to crime recording.

Under the NCRS an incident will be recorded as a crime if, on the balance of probability, the circumstances as reported amount to a crime defined by law unless there is credible evidence to the contrary.

⁵ By using a subset of crimes better comparisons can be made between the BCS and recorded crime; the comparable crime subset includes vandalism, burglary, vehicle-related theft, bicycle theft, theft from the person, wounding, robbery, assault with minor injury and assault without injury.

⁶ http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/AnnualReports/2007/policedataquality2006_07REP.pdf

⁷ For further detail see the Library note [Changes in Crime Recording Practices](#)

The NCRS should harmonise police forces' approach to crime recording as it brings about more consistency in the systems used to record crime when compared to the recent past. This will enable more robust comparisons between police forces.

These two changes had a significant effect on the number of offences recorded by the police.

- The number of crimes recorded in England and Wales 1998/99, under the new rules, was estimated to be 14% higher than the number that would have been recorded under the previous counting rules.
- The impact of the NCRS implementation on total recorded crime levels was estimated by the Home Office to be 10% in its first year of implementation. This means that in 2002/03, total recorded crimes were 10% higher than they would have been under pre-NCRS recording. The estimated effects varied substantially between offence groups – 23% for violence against the person compared to 2% for burglary.

2 What comparisons can be made?

As there has been no change to the methodology of the BCS the published data from this source may be used for time series analysis.

Because of the implementation of the NCRS the published recorded crime data should only be compared from 2002/03.⁸ Even when using this data it should be noted that the impact of the NCRS implementation was not confined only to 2002/03 and that increased levels of NCRS compliance across police forces in subsequent years will have affected crime recording.

For some police forces, for certain categories of crime, the Home Office has published estimates of the immediate effects of the changes to recording practices.

In order to calculate the effect of the 1998 change the Home Office had hoped that each police force in England and Wales would provide two separate counts of recorded crime in 1998/99 under both the old and new rules (referred to as double counting). Eighteen police force areas undertook this preferred Home Office method.⁹ The remaining twenty-five police forces carried out an exercise designed by the Home Office to sample a proportion of the offences that forces thought would be most affected by the rule change. This sampling exercise was favoured by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) as they believed double counting would be too time consuming.

- For all police forces in England and Wales it is possible to adjust the total number of crimes recorded to take account of the change to counting rules and coverage revisions.
- For those police forces that 'double counted' it is possible to provide similar adjustments for individual offence groups.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/soti.html>

⁹ The following police forces double counted in 1998/99: Avon & Somerset, Bedfordshire, Cheshire, Cleveland, Dorset, Essex, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Humberside, City of London, Metropolitan, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, South Yorkshire, Warwickshire, West Yorkshire, North Wales and South Wales.

¹⁰ Data provide by Home Office /RDS

The change in 1998 was largely mechanical in that forces counted crimes on a per victim rather than per offence basis, so it was reasonable in these circumstances to assume that the change in counting procedures had a one off impact on trends.

The first year NCRS effect on the number of crimes recorded by the police in 2002/03 was calculated at police force level enabling the generation of a national estimate.¹¹ The effect was derived by comparing trends in the ratio of crime related incidents reported by the public to the police, and the number of crimes recorded by the police.

It has only been possible to calculate the NCRS impact within certain crime groups as incident information at police force level is not available for all categories. The groups include violence against the person, burglary from a dwelling, robbery, theft and total crime.

No estimate was made of the NCRS impact at smaller geographies than police force area and as such comparisons at a BCU/CDRP level should not be made prior to 2002/03.

- For those forces that provided information on the effect of NCRS impact in 2002/03, an adjustment can be made for total crime and, where available, selected offence groups. Such an estimate does not take account of the ongoing impact of NCRS implementation.¹²

3 Adjusting the recorded crime series.

The adjustments to the recorded crime series are based on the estimates published by the Home Office. These estimates are not intended to provide precise adjustments to the crime figures, but to indicate the broad impact of the methodological changes in the first year of NCRS implementation.

The following is a working example of the adjustment made to the England and Wales total recorded crime data series.

Between 1997/98 and 1998/99 the total number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales, under the counting rules in existence prior to 1 April 1998, fell by 1.4%.¹³

Under the 'new' counting rules introduced from 1 April 1998 the annual changes in total recorded crime in England and Wales were:¹⁴

- 1998/99 – 1999/00 3.8%
- 1999/00 – 2000/01 -2.5%
- 2000/01 – 2001/02 6.9%

Between 2001/02 and 2002/03 total recorded crime in England and Wales, excluding the British Transport Police, rose by 7%. However the impact of the NCRS implementation on total recorded crime levels was estimated by the Home Office to be 10%.¹⁵

In order to adjust for the impact of the NCRS the 2001/02 figure is increased by the NCRS impact figure - in this case 10%. The difference between the adjusted figure and the published 2002/03 figure is then calculated – in this case 2.9%.

¹¹ [National Crime Recording Standard \(NCRS\): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime, Part One](#)

¹² [National Crime Recording Standard \(NCRS\): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime, Part Two](#)

¹³ [Table 6, Recorded Crime Statistics 1998/99 Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/99](#)

¹⁴ [Table 2.04, Crime in England and Wales 2008/09](#)

¹⁵ [Table 3a, National Crime Recording Standard \(NCRS\): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime, Part One](#)

For the remaining years of the time series the annual percentage changes can be calculated from the published data.

The percentage change figures for each year can be used to create an index of recorded crime with 1997/98 as the base year set to 100. Applying the percentage change figures for each year enables estimates of changes in recorded crime to be made.

In the example being used here the total recorded crime index is calculated to be 81.4 in 2008/09. This means that total recorded crime in England and Wales, adjusted for the changes to crime recording practices, is estimated to be 18.6% lower in 2008/09 than in 1997/98.

It should be noted that the estimated NCRS impact of 10% relates to an effect in the first year of operation of the NCRS, although, the NCRS impact was not confined to that single year. As mentioned in section 1.2, it has taken time for police forces to improve their NCRS compliance. No estimate has been made of the effect on the number of crimes recorded in subsequent years as changes continued to be bedded in.

Charts 1 and 2 on the following page show the trends since 1997 in recorded crime and BCS crime for selected offence groups after making adjustment for the first year effect of NCRS in 2001/2 and the changes in counting procedures in 1998/99.

Chart 1 - Trends in recorded crime by selected offence group, England and Wales

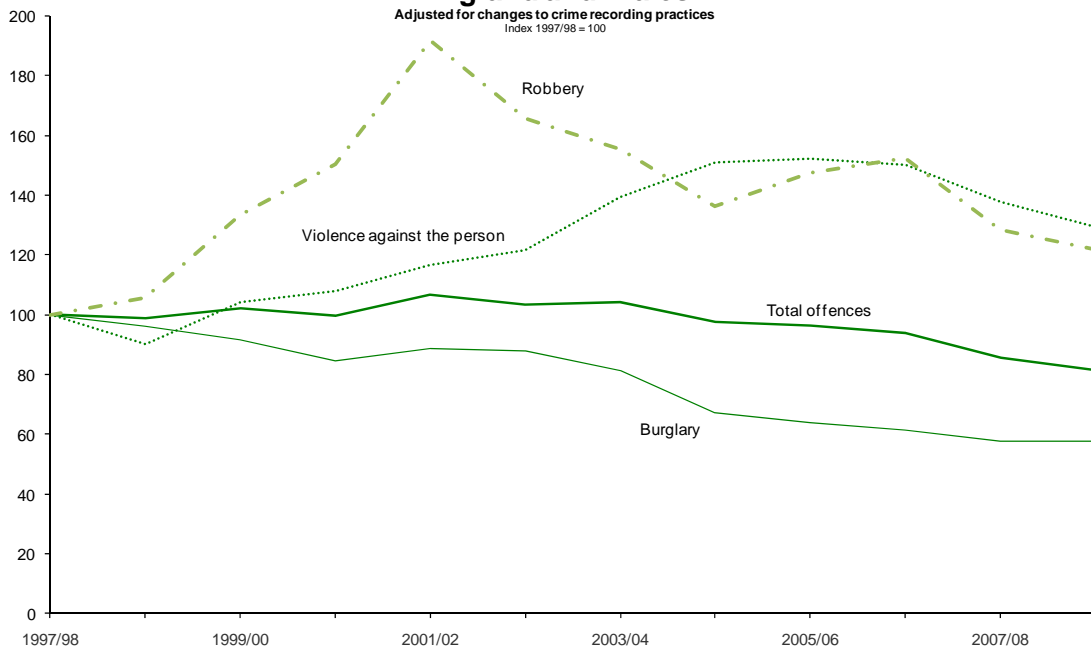


Chart 2 - Trends in BCS crime for selected offences

