

Chapter Three

Statistical Overview of the Current Nature and Extent of Crime in New South Wales

3.1 Introduction

As a first step towards developing effective crime prevention strategies it is necessary to analyse criminal trends and the demographics or relevant characteristics of both offenders and victims. Some of the questions that need to be answered before positive crime prevention policies and programs can be implemented are:

- what are the most common types of crimes being committed?
- have there been any significant upward or downward trends?
- where are most crimes being committed?
- who are committing crimes?
- who are the victims of crimes? and
- is there a difference between the perception and the actual rates of crime?

An understanding of criminal trends has implications for the nature, cost and scope of crime prevention and diversion programs. Weatherburn, Matka and Lind¹ write that:

unwarranted public concern about crime can...lead to excessive expenditure by governments on law and order at the expense of other important areas of public service (eg hospitals and schools).

Further, the information gleaned from criminal statistics is also important to use in evaluating the success or failure of crime prevention programs. Targeting the “wrong” group in any crime prevention program also poses the risk of netwidening on the one hand, and overlooking those at risk on the other.

One of the major advantages of understanding crime statistics is to be able to distinguish between crime perception and reality. In Australia, it appears that there is considerable fear of crime among the public. Media distortions (both intentional and unintentional) and colourful law and order debates by political parties of diverse persuasions, particularly prior to an election, can

¹ Weatherburn, Matka and Lind, *Crime Perception and Reality: Public Perceptions of the Risk of Criminal Victimization in Australia*, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 1996, p 7.

often lead to a misperception by the public that we are experiencing a terrifying crime wave.

This can then lead to a colouring of the issues in the crime prevention debate with calls for greater police presence and powers and harsher punishments for offenders. Crime prevention issues can also be erroneously branded options for the “bleeding hearts” and an indication of policymakers going “soft on crime”.

Skogan² also maintains that in some circumstances fear of crime can

precipitate neighbourhood decline and thereby generate an increase in crime and other social problems..As fear of crime rises in a neighbourhood, the better-off residents begin to leave, the poorer remaining residents increasingly withdraw physically and socially from community life and this weakens the informal social control processes which inhibit crime and disorder.

At the same time however, the tendency among the public to exaggerate the risks of serious crime, should not be dismissed as irrational. All reasonable avenues for reducing public fear of crime deserve to be explored together with actually reducing crime.³ Therefore, an effective crime prevention strategy should ensure that **fear** of crime is also identified and addressed.

3.2 Sources of statistics

Criminal statistics in New South Wales are gathered from a range sources. The most relied upon are those recorded by the Police Service and those collected from crime victims’ surveys. In New South Wales, the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research is responsible for compiling police statistics. The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts an annual crime victims’ survey, the *NSW Crime and Safety Survey*. The latest NSW Crime and Safety Survey was released on 1 December 1999.

Although court statistics are another means of obtaining relevant information, they only reveal trends in the number of alleged offenders appearing in court or being convicted. They do not reveal crimes for which no offender was arrested or prosecuted. Relevant data, particularly in relation to recidivism, can also be gathered from the Departments of Corrective Services and Juvenile Justice.

² 1986, cited in Weatherburn, Matka and Lind, *ibid* 1996, p 7.

³ *Ibid* p 8.

This chapter will focus mainly on the most recent police statistics, the *NSW Crime and Safety Survey* and court statistics.

Police statistics are based on the number of reported and recorded offences by the police service. An offence is recorded by the police when it is “cleared”, that is, when in the view of the police, it has been satisfactorily dealt with by charge or otherwise.⁴ By their nature, police statistics show those offences that members of the public are willing to report, and those accounted for, by the police. Police statistics are therefore limited in the information they reflect since they can be strongly influenced by the changes in the willingness of people to report crime and by changes in policing priorities and effectiveness.⁵

Certain crimes such as sexual assault are traditionally under-reported for numerous reasons, so the numbers shown in police statistics may not be an entirely accurate reflection of the actual rate of the crime. Any trends in sexual offences shown in police statistics must therefore, also be cautiously examined. Other under-reported crimes include domestic violence and child abuse – that is, those offences which are committed in the home. The National Committee on Violence⁶ also noted that:

a large number of offences involving victims and offenders who are closely related, and most assaults, of a relatively minor nature, go unreported.

In contrast, most motor vehicle thefts and household break-ins are reported to police.⁷

The information gathered from **crime victims’ surveys** is based on the experiences of the victim. Crimes that have not been reported to, or recorded by, the police can be included in crime victims’ surveys. As well as providing information on victimisation rates, these surveys reveal demographic characteristics of victims, and their relationship with the offender.⁸

⁴ M. Chilvers, *New South Wales Recorded Crime Statistics 1998*, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 1999, pvii.

⁵ K Freeman, *Crime Trends in New South Wales: The Crime Victim Survey Picture*, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 1998, p 1.

⁶ National Committee on Violence, *Violence: Directions for Australia*, Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1990, p 6.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Crime and Safety: New South Wales*, Canberra, 1999, p 5.

⁸ Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Violence in Society*, 1993, p 13.

3.3 Current crime statistics

3.3.1 Police statistics

The following information is based on Marilyn Chilvers' reports for the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research namely, *New South Wales Crime Statistics*⁹ and *Key Trends in Crime and Justice: New South Wales, 1998*.¹⁰ In introducing the later report Weatherburn observes:¹¹

the overview in this year's report indicates that, although there are a number of offences whose recorded rate is still rising in New South Wales the position as at the end of 1998 is a significant improvement on that revealed in the 1997 Recorded Crime Statistics Report.

In the report, *Key Trends in Crime and Justice: New South Wales, 1998* the following statistically significant trends during the period January 1997 and December 1998 for recorded crime rates are reported:¹²

- assault (**up by 5.0%**);
- sexual assault (**down by 15.0%**);
- indecent assault/other sexual offences (**down by 19.5%**);
- robbery with a weapon not a firearm (**up by 28.4%**);
- break and enter – dwelling (**up by 5.8%**);
- break and enter – non-dwelling (**up by 5.6%**);
- steal from motor vehicle (**up by 4.7%**);
- steal from dwelling (**up by 6.5%**); and
- malicious damage to property (**up by 10.7%**).

No statistically significant trend was recorded in the following offences:

- murder;
- robbery without a weapon;
- robbery with a firearm;
- motor vehicle theft;
- steal from retail store; and
- steal from person.

⁹ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 1999.

¹⁰ M. Chilvers, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 1999.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p iii.

¹² *Ibid* p 6.

Reporting on criminal trends, Chilvers notes:¹³

the trends in recorded crime shown in this report will...reflect movements in the underlying factors which influence the detection, reporting and recording of crime as well as changes in the true level of crime in the community.

3.3.2 Assault

The following figure represents the monthly rate of **recorded** incidents of assault for the four years from January 1995 to December 1998:¹⁴

From January to December 1998, the highest rate of assault in New South Wales was recorded in the Far West Statistical Division (Broken Hill, Central Darling, Unincorporated Far West). There were also high rates of assault in the North Western Statistical Division (Bogan, Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coolah, Coonabarabran, Coonamble, Dubbo, Gilgandra, Mudgee, Narromine, Walgett, Warren and Wellington) and in the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision (Botany Bay, Leichhardt, Marrickville, South Sydney and Sydney). The rate in each of these three

¹³ *Ibid* p 3.

¹⁴ It is reproduced from Marilyn Chilvers study for the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, *Key Trends in Crime and Justice, NSW, 1998, 1999*, p 9.

regions was more than double the rate for New South Wales. Chilvers writes:¹⁵

Of the three regions which recorded the highest rates of assault in 1998, however, only one region recorded an increase in the assault rate between 1997 and 1998. While the rate for the Far West Statistical Division and the Inner Sydney Statistical Division remained relatively stable over this two year period, the rate of assault in the North Western Statistical Division increased substantially in between 1997 and 1998 (an increase of 10.0%)

3.3.3 Sexual offences

The following figure represents the monthly rate of **recorded** incidents of sexual assault and indecent assault/other sexual offences for the four years from January 1995 to December 1998.¹⁶

As Chilvers' figures show, there were statistically significant downward trends in **sexual offences**, over the January 1997 to December 1998 period. This should be interpreted with some caution as the downward trend could indicate a decrease in rates of reporting of sexual offences rather than a decline in the rate of the actual offences. In fact, crime victims' surveys show that in 1993, 28.8% of victims reported a sexual assault to police compared with 18.8% in 1997.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid* p 6.

¹⁶ It is reproduced from Marilyn Chilvers study for the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, *Key Trends in Crime and Justice, NSW, 1998 1999*, p 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p 5.

The highest rate of sexual assault from January 1997 to December 1998 was recorded in the Far West Statistical Division, followed by the North Western Statistical Division of New South Wales. The highest rate in the Sydney Division was in the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision. The lowest rates of sexual assault during 1998 were recorded in Hornsby-Kuringai followed by the Lower Northern Sydney Division (Hunters Hill, Lane Cove, Mosman, North Sydney, Ryde and Willoughby).

3.3.4 Robbery offences

Robbery offences are more likely to occur in the Sydney Statistical Division than in other divisions in New South Wales:¹⁸

For example, on a per capita basis, the recorded rate of robbery with a weapon other than a firearm in the Sydney Statistical Division during 1998 was more than four times the rate in country New South Wales (ie all Statistical Divisions excluding Sydney). For each robbery subcategory, the highest rate of recorded incidents in 1998 occurred in the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision.

Although the offences of robbery without a weapon and robbery with a firearm showed no significant upward or downward trend, robbery with a weapon but not a firearm increased by nearly 30% from the period January to December 1997 and January to December 1998.

3.3.5 Break and enter

Break and enter offences are one of the most frequently occurring serious offences.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid* p 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p 9.

The highest recorded rate of break enter – dwelling was in the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision, and was almost two times the rate of the State.²⁰ The highest recorded rate of both break and enter-dwelling and non-dwelling outside the Sydney Statistical Division was in the North Western Statistical Division. According to Chilvers.²¹

Overall, in 1998, the recorded rates of break and enter – non-dwelling offences were generally highest in the country areas of New South Wales.

Chilvers' reports that there was no significantly upward or downward in the number of monthly recorded incidents of **motor vehicle theft** in New South Wales for the period January 1997 to December 1998 but there was a statistically significant upward trend for the offence of steal from motor vehicle. The Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision had the highest recorded rate of motor vehicle thefts and was two and a half times as high as the State rate. Canterbury-Bankstown, Fairfield-Liverpool, and Central-Western Sydney Subdivisions also recorded high rates of motor vehicle offences.

The country regions of New South Wales recorded the lowest rates of motor vehicle theft and steal from motor vehicle during 1998.

3.3.6 Stealing offences

Among the range of stealing offences the only statistically significant upward trend in the number of recorded incidents, over the period January 1997 to December 1998, occurred in the offence of steal from dwelling. This increased by 7.7% from 1997 to 1998. The highest recorded rate for steal from dwelling was the Far West Statistical Division, followed by the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision and the North Western Statistical Division. The lowest rates of this offence category during 1998 were recorded in areas within the Sydney Statistical Division.²² Chilvers further reports:²³

between 1997 and 1998, most geographical regions of New South Wales recorded an increase in the rate of steal from dwelling offences. In particular, large percentage increases were recorded in the Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision (up by 23.8% from 1997 to 1998), and the Central West (up by 20.5%) and South Eastern Statistical Divisions of New South Wales (up by 20.1%).

²⁰ *Ibid* p 10.

²¹ *Ibid* p 10.

²² *Ibid* p 11.

²³ *Ibid* p 12.

3.3.7 Malicious damage to property

The recorded rate of malicious damage to property increased by 10.7% between January 1997 and December 1998, representing a statistically significant upward trend.

The Inner Sydney Statistical Subdivision recorded the highest rate of incidents. In regional areas, the highest recorded rates occurred in the Far West and North Western Statistical Divisions.²⁴

3.4 Crime and locality

The short time period from which these statistics come makes it difficult to properly analyse the meaning of the various trends. However, they can provide us with useful information about the concentration of recorded offences. To this end, they can further give rise to issues of the level of policing, reporting and recording practices and the level of criminality in these areas. For instance, Cunneen has argued in numerous studies that the high police staffing levels in certain Local Government Areas is one factor for the high rate of Aboriginal young people in the juvenile justice system.²⁵

It is apparent that police statistics show crime as concentrated in two areas, namely rural areas (particularly the far west) and inner city areas. Further, as

²⁴ *Ibid* p 13.

²⁵ see eg, G Luke and C Cunneen, *Aboriginal Over-representation and Discretionary Decisions in the NSW Juvenile Justice System*, Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, 1995, p iv.

it will be discussed in Chapter Four, the rate of recorded incidents in a particular area can also reflect the level of disadvantage in that area. For example, many of the suburbs and towns identified by Professor Tony Vinson as being disadvantaged in his study, *Unequal in Life: the Distribution of Social Disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales*,²⁶ come within the statistical divisions that show a high rate of recorded incidents of crime as reported in Marilyn Chilvers study. This is particularly the case for regions within the Far West and North Western Statistical Division.

3.5 Court data

3.5.1 Children's Courts

Data from the Children's Courts show that, for the 1997-98 period the majority of juvenile offenders were male, representing over 80% of offenders involved in finalised cases. Generally, for each offence category, less than 20% of total finalisations involved female offenders.²⁷ However, 39% of cases of fraud, 33.5% of shoplifting, 25.3% of assault and 20.6% of against justice offences involved female offenders. Those offences which primarily involved males in the 1997-1998 period were:

- break and enter offences (91.7% of finalised cases involved males); and
- driving offences (91.5%)

Moreover, Chilvers calculates that all but two cases of sexual assault involved males.

Over the 1993-1998 period the most commonly determined category of offence was assault, followed by break and enter.

In relation to statistically significant trends, Chilvers²⁸ provides the following information:

- there was a small decrease in the overall number of cases finalised in the Children's Courts between 1996-97 and 1997-98 (down by 2.7%);
- the number of cases involving driving offences as the most serious offence charged increased by 59.5% between 1996-97 and 1997-98;
- the number of offences against justice procedures increased by 17.4%;

²⁶ T. Vinson, Jesuit Social Services, Melbourne, 1999.

²⁷ M Chilvers, *op cit* 1999, p 76.

²⁸ *Ibid* p 77.

- increases were evident in robbery offences, drug offences and theft offences; and
- decreases occurred in cases of shoplifting, fraud and sexual offences.

3.5.2 Local Courts

The Local Courts hear the majority of criminal offences, either in relation to minor offences or as committal hearings for more serious offences.

For the 1998 period males were the most frequently prosecuted and convicted offenders in all court jurisdictions. In that year they made up 83% of all persons found guilty in the Local Courts and females made up 17%. In 1997 the figures were largely comparable, being 83.8% and 16.2% respectively.²⁹ The most common offences committed by women were:

- prostitution;
- larceny by shop stealing;
- fraud; and
- 'other' larceny.

Offences showing larger percentages of males being found guilty were:

- sexual assault offences;
- sexual offences against children;
- weapon offences; and
- break and enter offences.³⁰

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reports that the average age of persons found guilty in New South Wales Local Courts in 1998 was 30.7 years. The average age of convicted females was 30.9 years and males, 30.6 years of age.

Convicted males in the under 20 years age group were over-represented in the following offences:

- vehicle theft;
- dealing and trafficking in opiates; and
- break and enter.

²⁹ *Ibid* p xiv.

³⁰ *Ibid* p xv.

Chilvers' analysis reveals that in 1998 imprisonment was imposed on 16.5% of Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders compared with 7% of all New South Wales persons in that year. She writes:³¹

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders were more likely than New South Wales persons overall...to be sentenced to imprisonment after conviction for offences in almost all offence categories.

3.5.3 District and Supreme Courts

Males made up 91.2 per cent and females, 8.8 per cent of all persons convicted in the New South Wales Higher Courts in 1998. In 1997 these proportions were 91.9% and 8.1% respectively.³² The average age of convicted males was 31.6 years of age and for convicted females, 32.9 years of age. Further:³³

the offence category for which the average age of convicted persons in the Higher Courts was highest was that of against the person offences.

Males in the 20-24 year age group and in the 30-49 year age group record the highest proportion of assault and robbery convictions among all age groups.

Males in the under 20 years age group made up 11.1% of all convicted persons in 1998. This group was over-represented in the following offences:

- robbery;
- against good order; and
- vehicle theft.

3.5.4 Conclusion

It is obvious that crimes are predominantly committed by males, particularly crimes of violence or other more serious offences. Further, the data shows that there is no evidence of a youth crime wave.

3.6 The Australian Bureau of Statistic Crime Victims' Survey

The latest Crime Victims' Survey for New South Wales was released on 1 December 1999 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The survey, *Crime and Safety, New South Wales*³⁴ provides information on the incidence of

³¹ *Ibid* p. xiv.

³² *Ibid* p xxii.

³³ *Ibid* p xxii.

³⁴ *op cit* p 1.

selected crimes, crime reporting behaviour and individuals' perceptions of crime problems in their neighbourhoods. Those offences covered in the survey included selected household crimes including break and enter, attempted break and enter and motor vehicle theft, and selected personal crimes including robbery, assault and sexual assault.

In the 12 months to April 1999, compared with the 12 months to April 1997 (no survey was undertaken in 1998) the following results occurred:

- break and enter offences remained stable;
- motor vehicle offences remained stable;
- the number of victims of assault increased by 16%; and
- the number of adult female victims of sexual assault remained stable.

In relation to those categories of offences which remained stable, Weatherburn argues that:³⁵

this confirms recent police figures which show stability in the recorded rates of major household crimes during this same period.

The survey reveals that males are more likely to be victims of crime than females. Further, the highest victimisation rate across all persons was amongst 15-24 year olds.³⁶

The survey found that those at greatest risk of crime victimisation are the socially disadvantaged. For instance, the victimisation rate for the unemployed was 11% compared with 5.5% for employed persons. For household crimes, one parent households had the highest victimisation rate.

Revictimisation was examined in the survey. It was found that in the 12 month reference period:

- of those households which experienced household crime, 29.4% were victims on more than one occasion; and
- of those persons who were victims of personal crime, 45.9% experienced more than one incident and about 30% of assault victims were assaulted three or more times.

For victims of assault the results of the survey also revealed that:

- 46% knew the offender in the last incident; and

³⁵ Press Release, 1 December 1999.
³⁶ *op cit* p 3.

- One in ten victims of assault were assaulted by a family member.

3.7 Conclusion

Criminal statistics can provide important and valuable information for the development and implementation of crime prevention programs. Indeed, they are the most important measure for determining whether a crime prevention strategy has been effective in a given area. When developing crime prevention initiatives however, it is imperative to look further than just the rates of particular offences. For instance, strategies designed to prevent personal crime must take into account that most offenders are known to their victims and that in many cases family members are the perpetrators of assault. Further, the fact that males commit most crimes, and are over-represented in crimes of violence against women, raises issues about including gender components in any crime prevention strategy.

The vulnerability of victims, as well as potential and actual offenders, must be of primary significance when developing interventions. As the data shows, victims of crime are primarily drawn from the socially disadvantaged. This would imply that offenders and victims are commonly located in the same areas, that is, areas which tend to be characterised by poverty and isolation. Strategies that enable these people to feel secure and confident in their communities must therefore be developed and implemented as a priority of government.