

Smart Justice

“Smart action for a safer community”

Crime statistics – the real picture

Crime statistics help to provide a picture of the crime rate. However, none of the available methods of recording crime are perfect, and it is important to understand the limitations of crime statistics when interpreting them. Crime statistics do enable us to see broad trends in crime. These broad trends indicate that overall crime in Victoria decreased from 2000/01 to 2010/11, but has started to rise over the last three years. However, the current crime rate is still 1.6% lower than it was ten years ago, and 20.9% below the 2000/01 rate.

Measuring crime – police crime statistics and crime victimisation surveys

There are a number of different sources of statistics on crime. Two key sources are police crime statistics and crime victimisation surveys. Neither of these sources alone can offer comprehensive data about crime and are unlikely to ever capture its true extent.¹

Police statistics and gaps in reporting and recording crime

Police crime statistics measure crimes reported to police and recorded by police. Their accuracy can be affected by factors like the public's confidence in reporting crimes to police and the police's accuracy in recording particular crimes. For example, crimes such as sexual assault are grossly underreported. Research shows that only around 12.6% of all sex offences are recorded by police.² According to the Sentencing Advisory Council, this is due to a range of factors, including fear of retribution, 'fear of giving evidence ... fear of not being believed ... or lack of knowledge and access to help'.³

Similarly, family violence has historically been underreported and poorly responded to by police. However, in 2004, Victoria Police introduced a new Family Violence Code of Practice, which aimed to improve police responses to incidents of family violence and boost community confidence to report. A second edition of the Code was released in 2010 to reflect new family violence laws in Victoria and further enhance police responses. As a result of

these changes, the proportion of family violence related assaults recorded by police has risen steadily.⁴ This rise has been welcomed as it most likely reflects better police responses and growing awareness of family violence, rather than an increase in family violence in the community.

In 2008, the Victorian Ombudsman conducted an investigation that identified 'poor administrative systems and historical Victoria Police practices which have led to some crime being under reported, such as assaults and less serious offences'.⁵

Taking population into account

To measure the risk crime presents to Victorians, it is important to take into account population changes when interpreting police crime statistics. Since 2003, Victoria's population has risen over 18%.⁶ Without taking population into account, it can be misleading to compare the number of offences ten years ago, to the number of offences today. Victoria Police crime statistics are often presented as a rate per 100,000 of population, which allows population changes to be taken into account in looking at long term crime trends.

Crime victimisation surveys

Agencies like the Australian Bureau of Statistics conduct crime victimisation surveys where people are asked whether they have been victims of particular types of crime. These surveys can provide a more accurate picture of crime as they avoid some of problems of underreporting associated with police crime statistics.⁷

There has been a recent increase in overall crime in Victoria, after a decade of falling crime rates

Police crime statistics show that overall crime in Victoria has gone up over the last three years. Previously, crime in Victoria had dropped for ten consecutive years from 2000/01 to 2010/11. Per head of population, this was around a 32% decrease.⁸ A key driver of this drop was the significant fall in property crime, such as burglary and theft.⁹

However, since 2010/11, total crime per head of population has risen 13.5%.¹⁰ As previously discussed, this can partly be explained by the increase in family violence related crime due to higher reporting rates and better police responses. There was also a rise in the number of drug offences recorded during this time.

Despite this increase, some crimes went down and overall crime rates are still relatively low

Despite the recent increase in crime, as stated in the overview, the overall crime rate is still 1.6% lower than it was ten years ago,¹¹ and 20.9% below what it was in 2000/01.¹²

Victoria Police Statistics show that over the past ten years, per head of population, property offences (including theft and robbery) are down by 16.3% and homicide has dropped 23.7%.¹³ The statistics also indicate that knife violence has fallen since 2004/05.¹⁴

Some violent crimes have been on the rise since 2000

While overall crime dropped consistently from 2000/01 to 2010/11, Victoria Police statistics indicate that assaults increased in this time. Per head of population, assaults recorded by police went up 45.1% across these ten years. This trend has continued as the total crime rate has risen: from 2010/11 to 2013/14, assaults have increased a further 20.9%.¹⁵

The increase in assaults recorded by police over this period is partly attributable to the increased reporting of family incident related crime. However, it is generally agreed that the increase in assaults being reported and recorded by police indicates increased levels of violence.¹⁶

Over ten years from 2004/05, per head of population, Victoria Police Statistics show that reported rape is up 30.3%.¹⁷

Drug offences have risen significantly since 2010/11

Since 2010/11, drug offence rates have increased by 45.8%. This has largely been driven by a 52.8% rise in drug use and possession offences.¹⁸

Politics and public perception

The public often has very little accurate knowledge of crime and the criminal justice system. People commonly think crime, and particularly violent crime, is constantly increasing, even when this is not the case.¹⁹

Crime statistics play a critical role in allowing the public to access information about crime rates. Yet, politicians commonly use crime statistics selectively to serve particular purposes. Parties in opposition tend to try and exaggerate the rate of crime, for example referring to raw police crime data and ignoring population increases. Parties in government tend to try and exaggerate decreases in overall crime or in certain categories of crime for example by focusing on overall crime rates.

Trusted independent advice on crime statistics

Unlike New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia,²⁰ Victoria does not yet have a fully functioning agency which independently compiles, analyses and publishes crime statistics. In 2009, the Victorian Ombudsman recommended consideration of the establishment of an independent unit to promote public confidence in crime statistics.²¹ The Ombudsman restated his recommendation in 2011.²² In 2013, the Victorian government allocated \$8.4 million over four years to create a Crime Statistics Agency ('CSA') to sit within the Department of Justice.²³

However, questions around how the CSA will function as an independent agency with the ability to audit crime statistics and provide robust and objective data to inform justice policy remain given the agency will sit within a government department.²⁴ The CSA will not publish data until January 2015.²⁵

This factsheet is based on the law of Victoria, Australia and was last updated on 11 September 2014.

1. See Australian Bureau of Statistics *Information Paper: Measuring Crime Victimization Australia: The Impact of Different Collection Methodologies*, 2002 and *Measuring Victims of Crime: A Guide to Using Administrative and Survey Data*, 2011. Other methods of measuring crime include looking at hospital admission rates for particular injuries and reports of crimes to community agencies such as sexual assault counselling services.
2. Sentencing Advisory Council, *Recidivism of Sex Offenders Research Paper* (2007) 7.
3. Sentencing Advisory Council, *Recidivism of Sex Offenders Research Paper* (2007) 7.
4. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2011/12, 31. In 2004, 15% of recorded assaults were family incident-related compared with 43.2% in 2012/13. See figure 46.
5. Ombudsman Victoria, *Crime Statistics and Police Numbers* (2009) 7.
6. See Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian Demographic Statistics* 3101.0. On 31 December 2003, Victoria's population was estimated at 4 900 176. By 30 December 2013, it was estimated at 5 790 990, a rise of 19.6%.
7. However, as they are household surveys, they do not capture crimes committed against the homeless or people in institutions such as prisons or mental health facilities. Further, there is still likely to be some underreporting of crimes such as sexual assault.
8. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2000/01, 12 and 2010/11, 6.
9. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2010/11, 32.
10. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 7.
11. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 4.
12. See revised 2000/01 statistics in Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2001/02 and Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 6.
13. See revised 2004/05 statistics in Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2005/06 and Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 6.
14. See also the Smart Justice media release, 'New Crime Stats Undermine 'Knife Crime' Perception', 6 September 2010 and fact sheet 'Reducing Knife Carrying and Knife Violence'.
15. See revised 2010/11 statistics in Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2011/12 and Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 6.
16. See e.g., Bondy in 'Crime Statistics and the Trouble with Knives', *The Law Report*, 12 October 2010.
17. See revised 2004/05 statistics in Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2005/06 and Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 6.
18. See Victoria Police *Crime Statistics* 2013/14, 46-48 and Australian Bureau of Statistics Cat. No. 3101.0 population figures for Victoria on 31 December 2010-2013.
19. Gelb, *More Myths and Misconceptions* (2008), Sentencing Advisory Council, 2 and 5.
20. See Freiberg, 'Statistics, Crime and Politics' (2013) 8 *Insight: Victorian Council of Social Service* 12.
21. Ombudsman Victoria, above n 5, 89-90.
22. Ombudsman Victoria, *Investigation into an Allegation about Victoria Police Crime Statistics* (2011) 31. See also Office of Police Integrity *Report of Investigation into Victoria Police Crime Records and Statistical Reporting* (2011) 12.
23. Victorian government media release, 'Government Recruits for Independent Crime Stats Agency Chief', 4 October 2013; Bell, 'New Independent Crime Stats Agency to be Set Up', *ABC News*, 4 October 2013.
24. See Freiberg, above n 20, 14; Crime Statistics Bill 2014. (Vic) Smart Justice, 'New Victorian Crime Stats Agency welcomed, but independence questioned', 4 October 2013.
25. 'New independent crime statistics agency to be set up', *ABC News On line*, 25 March 2014.