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 is 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 has decreased over the past decade.

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 provide comprehensive information about crime and the full extent of crime is unlikely to be ever captured.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. Sentencing Advisory Council research shows that only around 12.6% of all of the sex offences are recorded by police, due to a range of factors including fear of retribution, fear of giving evidence, fear of not being believed and lack of knowledge and access to help.²

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 sought to improve police responses to family violence incidents and encourage community confidence to report. As a result of the implementation of the new code, the proportion of family violence related assaults recorded by police rose.³ This rise was welcome - it did not indicate a rise in family violence, but rather showed that police were better responding to family violence incidents reported to them.

The Victorian Ombudsman also recently conducted an investigation that identified poor administrative systems and historical practices in Victoria Police “which have led to some crime being under reported, such as assaults and less serious offences.”⁴

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 2000, Victoria’s population has risen over 14%.⁵ 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.⁶

Overall, crime in Victoria is going down

Police crime statistics show that overall, crime is going down in Victoria and has dropped for nine consecutive years. Per head of population, it has dropped around 30% since 2000/01. One of main drivers for this drop has been significant drops in property crime such as burglary and theft.⁷ This is broadly consistent with trends across Australia.⁸
Some violent crimes have increased over the past ten years
While overall crime has dropped, Victoria Police statistics indicate that assaults have risen across the last ten years. Since 2000/01, per head of population assaults recorded by police have risen 40%.

The increase in assaults recorded by police over this period is partly attributable to the introduction of the Family Violence Code of Practice. However, it is generally agreed that the increase in assaults being reported and recorded by police indicates increased levels of violence. Crime victimisation surveys since 1998 also suggest assaults across Australia have increased. Since 2000/01, per head of population, Victoria Police statistics show that reported rape is up 9%, reported sex offences other than rape are down 29%, murder has dropped 14% and robbery is down 37%.

Knife violence has fallen
Victoria Police statistics indicate that knife violence has fallen over the past ten years. Per head of population, assaults with knives are down 12% and robberies with knives are down 61%. These figures undermine the perception that “knife crime” is increasing in Victoria. We do not have reliable data on whether knife carrying is increasing or decreasing.

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.

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 crime, for example by focusing on overall crime rates. The police also can have an interest in selectively reporting or emphasising particular crimes – for example to support the case for increases in police powers.

Trusted independent advice on crime statistics
Unlike New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia, Victoria does not have an 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. The Victorian Government has not acted on the recommendation.

Smart justice solutions
Establishing a Victorian crime statistics agency, independent of police and government, to monitor crime statistics and crime recording practices, publish regular reports on crime trends, provide accurate statistical information to the community and independent advice to government.