

According, to the latest figures on crime and punishment England and Wales, quite surprisingly, is doing relatively badly on the crime front, but is not using imprisonment quite as frequently as a number of our European neighbours. England and Wales, in fact, has the highest percentage increase in recorded crime of any EC country between 1987 and 1995. Crime in this country

Criminal statistics

Roger Matthews takes a sideways look at the figures across Europe.

has gone up by a staggering 31 per cent over this period while countries like Switzerland, Sweden and Denmark have recorded increases of five per cent or less over the same period. Interestingly, Scotland has a recorded increase of only 4 per cent.

Violent crime

Particularly bad news for England and Wales is that not only have we experienced the highest increase in recorded

Figure 1 Crimes (1) Recorded by the police

Country	1987	1995	% Increase 87-95.
England and Wales	3,892,200	5,100,240	31
Northern Ireland	63,860	68,808	8
Scotland	481,230	502,802	4
Republic of Ireland	85,358	102,484	20
France	3,170,970	3,665,320	16
Austria	391,291	486,433	24
Netherlands	1,042,120	1,124,466	8
Italy	1,867,035	2,267,488	21
Greece	303,182	329,110	9
Switzerland	334,017	346,634	5

**Data not available for all countries.
(1) More serious offences. The range of offences covered differs between countries and comparisons between absolute figures are therefore misleading.
Source: Criminal Statistics HMSO 1995 (abridged)*

crime over the last eight years but that this increase has been associated with an increase in violent and serious crime. At the same time there has been a slight reduction in the number of domestic burglaries and car crime, but since these forms of 'volume' crime were already approximately twice as high as any other western European country the slight decreases in these particular forms of criminal activity since 1993 provide little in the way of consolation.

Looking across western Europe, and bearing in mind that different countries operate with different definitions of offences and employ different recording methods, there is also some indication of increasing levels of violent crime in Germany and France. In relation to domestic

burglary there was a remarkable 54 per cent increase recorded in Greece between 1994 and 1995. Greece also experienced a 24 per cent increase in car theft over the same period.

Incarceration

A review of the changing use of imprisonment across western Europe produces some surprising revelations (Figure 2). In the Netherlands, which for many years has been held up as an example of a country with a low rate of imprisonment, the prison population has more than doubled in the last ten years. Spain has also experienced an increase in the prison population of over 70 per cent since 1987, while Italy, Portugal and Greece have all experienced increases in the region of 40 per cent over the same period. Surprisingly, between 1987 and 1995 the prison population in England and Wales increased by a modest nine per cent, while Scotland has had a 4 per cent increase and Northern Ireland a 6 per cent decrease.

These figures taken out of context, however, can be misleading, or at least provide a limited picture if they are not related to changes in the general population and importantly to the level and nature of crime. If we look at the prison population in different countries per 100,000 population then it appears that Spain and Portugal have the highest rate with 122 and 119 respectively. England and Wales,



Ministry of Justice, The Netherlands

Figure 2

PRISON POPULATION BY EUROPEAN COUNTRY AT 1ST SEPTEMBER 1995

European Country	1987	1993	1994	1995	Percentage increase 1987-95	1995 Prison Population Per 100,000 population	1995 Prison Population Per 100,000 recorded crime
England and Wales	47,105	45,633	49,393	51,265	9	99	1,005
Northern Ireland	1,858	1,902	1,911	1,740	-6	106	2,528
Scotland	5,421	5,900	5,594	5,657	4	110	1,125
Republic of Ireland	1,936	2,108	2,053	2,032	5	60	1,983
France	50,639	51,134	53,758	53,178	5	89	1,451
Belgium	6,713	7,203	7,138	7,561	12	76	1,053
Germany	51,919	65,838	67,626	68,408	-	84	1,026
Austria	7,419	7,099	6,806	6,180	-17	77	1,280
Netherlands	5,002	8,037	8,737	10,329	106	67	839
Norway	1,929	2,650	2,677	2,621	36	60	1,189
Sweden	4,298	5,794	5,768	5,767	34	65	591
Denmark	3,190	3,370	3,508	3,421	7	66	635
Finland	4,252	3,432	3,322	3,092	-27	60	811
Portugal	8,424	11,079	10,023	11,829	40	119	3,622
Italy	34,838	51,231	52,041	49,102	41	86	2,165
Greece	4,157	7,135	5,835	5,878	47	60	1,786
Spain	23,646	45,711	41,169	40,157	70	122	-
Switzerland	3,449	4,128	4,188	4,104	19	58	1,183

Source: Criminal Statistics (HMSO) 1995 Table 1.4. p25 to which the reader should refer for additional footnotes.

Scotland, and Northern Ireland, although relatively high up the league on this criterion do not use imprisonment quite as frequently as is often suggested. Examined in relation to recorded crime England and Wales appear to be much less punitive than a number of other EC countries. Thus although the prison population in countries like Italy may be relatively small a relatively high percentage of cases which come to the attention of the police end up with custodial sentences.

A complex picture

From this brief snapshot of crime and imprisonment across western Europe a complex and differentiated picture emerges in which England and Wales appears to leading the way in terms of crime. For many years we have had a rate of domestic burglary and car crime which has been second to none, and in the current period we appear to be surging ahead in relation to serious and violent crime. Paradoxically, however, our use of imprisonment, up to 1995 at least, was relatively parsimonious in comparison to some western European countries, but

all the signs over the past two years suggest that we have made up considerable ground in this respect.

Of vital importance in assessing recent trends in crime and imprisonment is an appreciation of the effect of increased social mobility, the emergence of new forms of social exclusion and in particular the growing problem of refugees across Europe. Recent research, for example, has shown that in some central European countries the number of foreigners in prison is growing steadily each year. In some countries such as Austria, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium over 30 per cent of prisoners are non-nationals. In Belgium the number of nationals in prison is decreasing steadily while the number of foreigners is increasing every year. This development appears to be producing a two-tier system of imprisonment across Europe; one system for nationals and one for foreigners.

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