

QUANTIFYING THE ISSUE

Trends in Recorded Violent Crime

In 1991, the police recorded 265,000 offences of violent crime (defined as comprising homicide, wounding and other violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery); this was some 5% of all crime. Although there was a growth in violent crime since 1990 of 6%, property crime (comprising burglary, theft, criminal damage and fraud) rose by 17%, and total recorded crime by 16%.

That violent crime should increase at a lesser rate than other crime in a particular period is far from sacrosanct. Recent Home Office research (Field 1990) suggests that violent non-property crime (i.e. violence against the person, sexual offences) rises less, or falls, when property crime - both violent (i.e. robbery) and non-violent - is rising most; and vice versa. A comparison of percentage changes in both sectors over the last ten years (chart A) provides evidence of this inverse relationship, at least after 1983.

CRIME AND THE ECONOMY

The research which further related the cyclical behaviour of recorded crime with that of key economic and social factors also concluded that links existed between larger rises in violent non-property crime and economic prosperity (as in 1987-89), and between larger rises in property crime (including robbery) and economic recession (as in 1990-91).

TRENDS IN SERIOUS VIOLENT CRIME

The 265,000 crimes of violence in 1991 included over 700 homicides among the 15,800 more serious, life-endangering offences of violence against the person (chart B). Homicides were up by 9% from 1990 and overall the more serious offences rose by 8%.

Within the 29,400 sexual offences, over 4,000 rapes were recorded. The rape total was 19% higher than in 1990 (representing 650 more offences), whereas sexual offences as a whole rose by only 1%. The number of recorded rapes has almost doubled in five years, but few believe that this truly reflects the actual trend. Police encouragement to victims to come forward and report rapes, in some cases through the establishment of rape and domestic violence units, has almost certainly resulted in increased proportions of offences being recorded.

ROBBERY

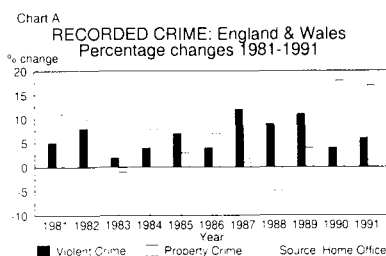
Robbery was described above as violent property crime as it combines elements of property theft and violence against the person. Indeed, trends in robbery statistics appear to vindicate this approach. In 1991, for example, while most of the sectors within violent crime experienced relatively small increases, robbery rose by a record 25%, more in keeping with the increases in some of the property offence groups.

VICTIMS & PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENT CRIME

A further insight into where recorded violent crime occurs, and who is involved, is possible as a result of further analyses obtained from police forces. Latest figures are for 1989, and although less than half of the forces have provided these data, the results are useful in providing at least a general impression.

The results indicate that, although more men than women were recorded as victims of violence against the person in 1989, the proportion of female victims had risen from 27% in 1986 to 33% in 1989. To put these figures into perspective, there were about 2 female victims per 1,000 population in 1989, against 5 male victims.

Over one in three victims were aged 16-24 in 1989, but this proportion had decreased since 1987 in favour of 25-39 year olds. 29% of offences were as a result of street brawls, with 15% due to domestic violence. However, almost one in three female victims suffered from

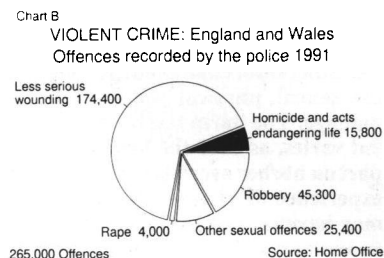


domestic violence.

Less than one third of recorded rapes were committed by strangers, according to the 1989 analysis. 70% occurred indoors in 1989, compared with 54% in 1985.

RECORDED vs ACTUAL CRIME

So far we have examined the latest picture in terms of recorded crime. However, this represents a considerable un-



derstatement of the true level of crime. In order to estimate the extent of unrecorded crime, the Home Office conducts the British Crime Survey (BCS) among a sample of some 10,000 people, to establish the proportion that have been the victim of crime over the period in question.

The survey is not conducted every year, and latest results are available for 1987 (Mayhew et al 1989). These results suggest that recorded crime was only picking up one in five offences of wounding and robbery actually being committed.

According to BCS, overall crime levels in England and Wales rose rather less between 1981 and 1987 than recorded crime figures had suggested: 30% compared with 41%. For wounding and robbery combined, the contrast is more marked, at 11% and 44% respectively. This would seem to be consistent with the suggestion made earlier in respect of rapes, that some of the recorded crime increase is down to increased notification (or changes in recording practices).

A new sweep of BCS has just been conducted to measure victimisation in 1991. Results expected later this year will give a reasonable impression of whether the trends in recorded crime between 1987 and 1991 have been realistic.

References

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