

European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics – 2003

Second edition | Key findings

Marcelo F. Aebi, Kauko Aromaa, Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay, Gordon Barclay, Beata Gruszczyńska, Hanns von Hofer, Vasilika Hysi, Jörg-Martin Jehle, Martin Killias, Paul Smit, Cynthia Tavares

A survey of 39 European countries compared statistical information available on crime and criminal justice statistics and, in particular, how this information was collected and defined, for the years 1995-2000. The survey has recently been published under the title 'European Sourcebook of crime and Criminal Justice Statistics – 2003. Second edition'. This flyer informs about some major findings of the study.

Comparisons below show European averages. Detailed information can be downloaded from the website www.europeansourcebook.org.

Key points

- The majority of countries collected information on crimes reported to the police and the prison population. However, fewer countries carried out victimisation surveys and information available on prosecution, convictions and sanctions and measures was often limited.
- Countries varied at the point in the criminal justice process at which statistics were recorded. For example, whether crimes were recorded when they were reported to the police or following an initial investigation.
- According to police statistics, violent assault, robbery and drug offences increased between 1995 and 2000. Homicide, total theft and theft of a motor vehicle remained stable, while burglary and domestic burglary decreased.
- The probability of a reported crime leading to an offender being suspected was slightly decreasing for most offence categories. More substantial decreases were noted for theft of a motor vehicle and domestic burglaries.
- The probability of a suspect being convicted increased for most offences between 1995 and 2000. The exceptions were burglaries with stable rates and drug offences with decreasing rates.
- There is a negative correlation between the workload of prosecuting authorities (disposed cases per 100 000 population) and the rate of cases brought before a court. This means that in countries where the prosecution authority had a low workload the rate of cases brought before a court would be high, while in countries where the workload was high the rate would tend to be low, suggesting that the criminal justice system tends to balance itself out.
- No relationship was found between the size of the prison population in a country and the general level of recorded crime. The main factors influencing prison population size are the length of the sanctions and measures imposed and the number of people sent to prison for serious offences.

Introduction

1. In 1996, the Council of Europe established a Group of Specialists on *Trends in crime and criminal justice: statistics and other quantitative data on crime and criminal justice systems*, which was composed of experts from thirteen countries. The group set up a network of national correspondents, collected data from 36 countries and then prepared a compendium¹ of crime and criminal justice data for the whole of Europe for the years 1990-1995/96. This work was continued by a group of nine specialists, who collected data from 39 countries for the years 1995 to 2000 with the help of the aforementioned network of national correspondents. The group got financial assistance from the UK Home Office, the Dutch Government and the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs (through the University of Lausanne). The work has resulted in the publication of the book 'European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics – 2003. Second edition'.
2. The data collected were put into a database that was set up at the University of Seville. This data was then validated to enable outliers to be identified and checked and to ensure a general consistency throughout the information received from each country. The process of validation is missing from most other international criminal justice surveys and this process has enabled the expert group to be more confident in the validity of the results produced.

¹ *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1999.*

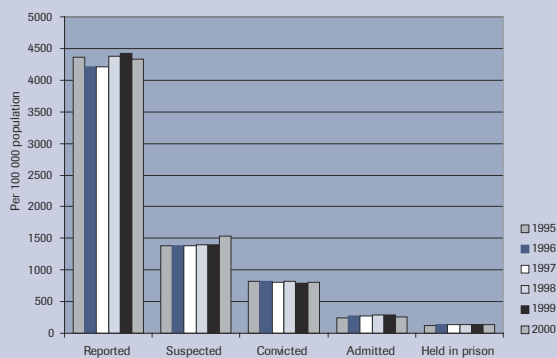


Figure 1
The Criminal Justice System in a Flow Perspective, 1995-2000. Reported offences, suspected offenders, convicted offenders, offenders admitted to prison, and offenders held in prison. Average rates per 100 000 of the population for 39 European countries

Figure 1 describes the general process from reporting offences to holding persons in prison. Two characteristic patterns are discernible. Firstly, there is not much variation between different years in an all-European perspective. Secondly, the figure shows the usual stages of the criminal justice process whose structure has often been compared to the one of an iceberg or a funnel. However, it must be kept in mind that the counting units are not the same at each stage.

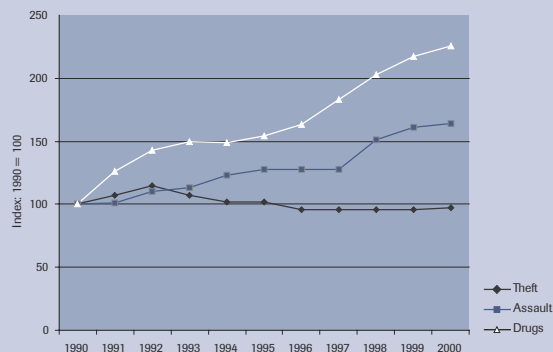


Figure 2
Offences recorded by the police, 1990-2000. Per 100 000 of the population. Selected offences. Average for 39 European countries

Figure 2 describes how three offence types (violent assault, total theft and drug offences) have changed in Europe since 1990. Data have been averaged for all countries that provided information. Police recorded drug offences and violent assaults have increased, while theft offences have remained more or less stable.

What information do countries collect and when do they collect it?

Crime statistics

- All countries collected police recorded crime statistics, but few countries have regular victimisation surveys to assist the interpretation of these statistics.
- Most countries were able to provide information on robbery, thefts, rape and violent assaults, while a few were able to provide data on domestic burglary, traffic offences and drug trafficking.
- Sixteen countries reported that offences were recorded immediately on first reporting to the police, fourteen countries subsequently, and seven following an initial investigation.

Suspected offenders

- Only a few countries could not provide data on suspected offenders, although many other countries could not provide detailed information for particular offences. In some countries, a suspect was counted as soon as the police had identified him or her. In other countries, suspects were only counted when some formal action had been taken.

Prosecution

- There is wide variation in the figures regarding the total of 'cases disposed of' by the prosecution authorities. Depending on the different 'workload' of the national prosecution authorities, different ways of handling of cases can be seen.

Convictions

- The definition adopted for this survey was that a conviction included both sanctions/measures imposed by a prosecutor based on the admission of guilt by the defendant and those imposed by a court.
- Almost all countries were able to supply some figures for convictions, but few could provide detailed information for particular offences.

- Countries varied in the extent to which juveniles were included in such statistics in total or at least partially.

Sanctions/measures

- Most countries submitted data on sanctions/measures for 1999. But some had difficulties in providing detailed information for particular offences.
- In twelve countries information on sanctions imposed referred to the position before the convicted offender made an appeal on either the verdict or the sentence. For 23 countries it related to the position when the appeal procedure was completed.

Prisons

- Although all countries collected and published information on their prison population, the method of collecting such data varied considerably. In some countries, it referred to a particular day of the year, in others to an average population. Countries also varied in the extent to which untried, juveniles and mentally disordered prisoners who may be held in special institutions are included in the figures.

Some empirical findings

Crime trends

- While *absolute comparisons* of police data may be misleading, the inherent biases within each criminal justice system and statistical collection system may be relatively stable over time. It can be seen that police recording practices do not overall change very much over a shorter period of time, and that, therefore, statistics on crimes known to the police may be treated as relatively valid indicators of *crime trends*.

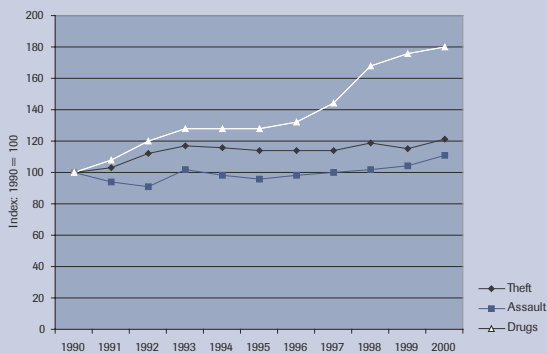


Figure 3
Offenders found guilty, 1990-2000. Per 100 000 of the population. Selected offences. Average for 39 European countries.

Figure 3 describes how the number of persons convicted for violent assault, total theft and drug offences have changed in Europe since 1990. Data have been averaged for all countries that provided information. Similar to the picture in Figure 2, even the number of persons convicted for drug offences increased (but to a lesser extent) and the number of persons convicted for theft offences remained stable. While violent assault offences increased according to Figure 2, the number of convicted persons for those offences shows a more stable pattern.

15. According to police statistics, violent assault, robbery and drug offences increased between 1995 and 2000. Homicide, total theft and theft of a motor vehicle remained stable, while burglary and domestic burglary decreased.
16. The number of police officers per 100 000 population varied greatly between countries.
17. A comparison between the number of persons convicted of an offence and the number of suspected offenders for the same offence indicated that the probability of a conviction had increased over this period for most offences. The exceptions were burglaries and drug offences with rather stable rates.
18. There is a great variety of prosecution statistics throughout Europe. This is due to differences at the input level (cases brought to the prosecution level) and output structures (cases disposed of by the prosecution authorities). Nevertheless, some common trends can be found: There is a negative correlation between the workload of prosecuting authorities (disposed cases per 100 000 population) and the rate of cases brought before a court. This means that in countries where the prosecution authority had a low workload the rate of cases brought before a court would be high, while in countries where the workload was high the rate would tend to be low. This suggests that the criminal justice system tends to balance itself out with the prosecutors dealing directly with a higher volume of cases when workload rises.

Factors affecting the prison population

19. Combining data on police recorded offences, conviction and correctional statistics shows that the imprisonment rate does not depend on the crime rate, but on the length of the sanctions imposed. However, when each offence is considered separately, it seems that the number of incarcerations (number of entries into prison) for the most serious offences offered the best explanation of the prison population level. For less serious offences, nevertheless, the length of the sentences imposed explains the prison population level better than the number of the sentences imposed.

Notes

1. The members of the group of experts were – in alphabetical order – Marcelo F. Aebi (Spain, database administrator), Kauko Aromaa (Finland), Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay (France), Gordon Barclay (United Kingdom), Beata Gruszczyńska (Poland), Hanns von Hofer (Sweden), Vasilika Hysi (Albania), Jörg-Martin Jehle (Germany), Martin Killias (Switzerland, chair), Paul Smit (the Netherlands, website administrator), and Cynthia Tavares (United Kingdom, secretariat).
2. The following offences were included in the survey: Total offences (of which traffic offences), homicide (including and excluding attempts), assault, rape, robbery, theft (of which theft of a motor vehicle, burglary and domestic burglary), drug offences (of which drug trafficking).
3. The survey covered:
 - Police statistics on crime, suspects and police personnel.
 - Prosecution statistics including prosecution personnel.
 - Court statistics including sentencing.
 - Correctional statistics including prison population, supervision, probation, conditional release and community service.
 - Data from the international crime surveys (victimisation data).

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