



Crime statistics, crime waves, and taking crime seriously

It is often taken for granted in popular and media debate that we are experiencing a “crime wave”. The threat of a “**crime wave**” seems to plague our TVs and newspapers. *Criminals rule the streets! Our children aren’t safe! Crime rates are soaring!*

Actually, it’s a bit more complicated. Whilst there is support for the claim that certain types of crime are on the increase, there are also a range of reasons to be suspicious of claims that there is a ‘crime wave’. This pamphlet examines some of these reasons.

Statistics are difficult to interpret

There are many different ways to approach measuring crime rates. For this reason crime statistics are often difficult to interpret as they measure a range of shifting factors including:

- Public feelings towards, and tolerance of certain behaviours
- Public definitions of certain events as “private matters” (eg domestic violence)
- How willing people are to report crime to the police. (This is also influenced by factors such as insurance, and confidence in the ability of police to do something about the crime)
- Police recording practices
- Political and administrative pressures on police
- Police numbers and work rates

Apart from homicide statistics, Australia has only had crime statistics since 1973. This means it

is very hard to make any long term historical comparisons. Often when we hear about a “**crime wave**”, this is based on a short term increase in a certain category of crime statistics. But crime statistics in NSW show increases and decreases in relation to different sorts of crime all the time. Even though we hear about short term increases more than short term decreases, both trends mean little in terms of the overall long term picture of crime rates in NSW.

Is some crime on the increase?

It is important to note that there are some crimes that do appear to be on the increase when viewed over a longer term period.

Over the last three decades there does seem to have been an increase in property crime. Property crime includes offences like car theft, and break and enters. The reasons for this increase are complicated but one of the contributing factors is the fact that we have more consumer goods now, and therefore more things to be stolen. Increased affluence, a market in stolen goods and heroin dependency are also important factors. Women joining the workforce, and therefore more homes being unoccupied during the day is also of note.

The statistics relating to violent crime also appear to have gone up since the early 1970’s in certain categories including assault, aggravated assault and sexual assault. Such increases are hard to interpret, mainly because these crimes are often **not reported**. So the statistics we do have aren’t necessarily an indicator of the amount of crime, but rather the



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amount that people are reporting it. For instance, at times, campaigns (for example on domestic violence) encourage more people to report specific types of crimes.

Robberies, which are an offence against both property and person have shown significant increases over the last decade. This is probably connected with increased levels of heroin dependency. The point is, that although there have been increases in certain types of crime, these increases are attributable to a range of specific and interwoven factors, not just a vague idea that 'things are getting worse' or that people are becoming 'more dangerous'.

The Homicide Rate is Lower than A Century Ago

The homicide rate is perhaps the most reliable crime statistic because it can be traced over the twentieth century and because most homicides **are reported**. The homicide rate has remained largely stable over the last three decades, with fluctuations up and down from year to year. **Homicide rates are lower today than they were at the beginning of the 20th century.** If we really were experiencing a generalised "crime wave" it is likely that that this would be reflected in an increased homicide rate.

What don't crime statistics tell us?

Criminal statistics concentrate on traditional forms of property crime and crimes against the person. They tell us little or nothing about other forms of criminal, violent, acquisitive and anti-social behaviours. Behaviours that are not recorded include things such as; tax avoidance, white collar crime, environmental crime, consumer fraud, money laundering, corruption and price fixing. These activities often involve greater social and economic costs than those crimes recorded in the statistics. Statistics

present us with only a skewed or partial picture of the state of 'crime' in NSW.

Taking crime seriously

Since colonisation, crime has been described in the media as "an epidemic", "overwhelming", "soaring", "engulfing", "running wild", "reaching epidemic proportions", and "infesting our streets". Such portrayals, found in editorials from the 1840s, are virtually the same as those of the 1960s and today. Every generation seems to have thought it was in the midst of an "unprecedented" level of crime when compared with the past. The suggestion is always that society is on the brink of collapse. When every generation makes the same claims, such statements lose a lot of credibility. It would seem that any 'crisis' is not so much one of law and order but one of perspective.

The basic point is that crime is a significant problem. Our ability to take it more seriously and reduce it is not however, assisted in debate by exaggerating the level of crime. Nor is it assisted by using the distorted notion of 'crime waves', or employing the rhetoric of the last two centuries- that crime is at historically unprecedented levels. Part of the task of taking crime issues more seriously involves discussing it in less sensational terms. In short, current popular and political debate around crime is part of the problem rather than part of the solution.



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