Introduction

Until 2015 police offences were recorded by the New Zealand Police as two annual series – one for the calendar year ending December 31st (published around April), and one for the fiscal year ending June 30 (published around August). Beginning in fiscal 2015 the New Zealand police discontinued their statistical series on offences and initiated a new monthly statistical series on victimisations.1 The Parliamentary Library publishes the new victimisations statistics as a data series that is updated twice yearly, covering both the fiscal and calendar years from 2015.

This research paper provides a longer-term perspective on crime in New Zealand by presenting and contrasting the two statistical series on crime in New Zealand. The first series examines calendar year offence statistics for the period 1994 – 2014; the second series examines calendar year victimisation statistics for the period 2015 – 2017. The paper examines:

- the incidence of crime (total offences, and total victimisations);
- the crime rate (offences and victimisations per capita);
- offences and victimisations by police district;
- the share of crime by offence or victimisation category.

No international comparisons of crime are attempted in this paper, since meaningful comparisons of crime cannot be made between different jurisdictions. Differences among societies with different levels of socio-economic development as well as differences in criminal justice systems influence the rates at which crimes are reported by victims. In particular the way crimes are recorded by the police – how crimes are defined, categorised, reported, and counted – make it very difficult to make meaningful comparisons. The reasons for this are detailed more fully in Appendix A. In short, however, Aebi sums up the difficulty of making meaningful comparisons of crime:

> In sum, our findings are not encouraging for researchers engaged in comparative criminology. They confirm that crime statistics are social constructs, that each society has its own special way of constructing them, and that cross-national comparisons of crime rates are therefore extremely difficult to realize.2

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2 See Marcelo F. Aebi, Methodological Issues in International Comparisons of Recorded Crime: The Role of Statistical Counting Rules, Andalusian Institute of Criminology, University of Seville, 2005. (p. 17). Available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6d81/1ba689fe152519677c90f167ca7a26f3bd5a.pdf
The Incidence of Crime – Total Offences

The Parliamentary Library has offence data from 1878 when a total of 14,157 offences were reported. This increased to 17,837 offences in 1880 or 344 offences per 10,000 population – the crime rate. The 1880 figure remained the peak in the reported crime rate until 1956 when 346 offences per 10,000 population were reported, or 75,583 offences in total. Thus, after remaining flat for the first half of the 20th century, the reported crime rate began rising steadily from 1950, reaching a calendar year peak of 1,405 offences per 10,000 population in 1992, when just under half a million offences were reported (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The Crime Rate in New Zealand (December years)

Note: These figures exclude traffic offences after 1978.

It should be noted that the official police statistics on crime (whether ‘reported offences’, ‘recorded offences’, or ‘victimisations’) do not reflect the actual incidence of crime in New Zealand. Some offences, such as those involving sexual offending or violence, are under-reported; other offending may be reported dependent on changes in media reporting and public confidence in the police. Changes in the legal definition of an offence, and policing practices including police discretion, improvements in technology, methods of counting (reported vs recorded offences) and police resources also affect whether an offence is actually recorded. For example, in 1978 traffic offences were excluded from the official count, in 1996 the ‘reported offence’ was replaced with the ‘recorded offence’ series, and in 2006 the police computer crime recording system was replaced. In each case a statistically significant effect on the ‘crime level’ was evident. Crime statistics are thus “constructions rather than complete reflections of reality”.

Nevertheless, because the recorded offence statistical series is internally consistent, comparisons and trends over time are able to be made. To account for the change in population, however, comparisons are best made using the crime rate. This is defined as the number of offences per 10,000 people. For example, while the highest number of recorded offences in a calendar year occurred in 1996 with 477,596 offences, 1996 had a lower crime rate (1280 offences per 10,000 pop) than 1992 which had the highest crime rate ever recorded (1308). By decade, the recorded crime rate:

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3 The actual incidence of sexual assaults, for example is estimated by the New Zealand Treasury to be 5.2 times the number of offences recorded by the police. See Tim Roper and Andrew Thompson, Estimating the costs of crime in New Zealand in 2003/04, New Zealand Treasury, Working paper 06/04, July 2006. Available at: http://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/research-policy/wp/2006/06-04/wp06-04.pdf

4 The recorded offence series excludes ‘no offence’ events where the police decide after investigation that the reported alleged offence has not occurred.

From offences to victimisations

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- increased 64.9% between 1970 and 1980;
- increased 33.6% between 1980 and 1990;
- decreased 9.1% between 1990 and 2000;
- decreased 11.5% between 2000 and 2010;
- decreased 20.7% between 2010 and 2014.

The lowest recorded crime rate over the period 1970-2014 was that for 1970 when 553.1 offences per 10,000 population was recorded. The 2014 crime rate of 777.0 was the lowest recorded crime rate since 1977.

Although both the total number of offences and the total crime rate have decreased significantly since the mid-1990s, these overall trends are not particularly useful because changes in low volume serious offences (such as violent or sexual crime) can be obscured by changes in high volume less serious offences (such as theft). Indeed, crime trends from 1994 show a mixed picture when crime rates for individual offence categories are examined.

**Offence Categories: 1994-2014**

From 1 July 2010, all New Zealand justice sector statistics, including police offences going back to 1994, were re-classified to comply with the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC) system where appropriate. Offences are classified according to the 16 major ANZSOC categories, with further sub-categories within each major offence code:

- Homicide and related offences
- Acts intended to cause injury
- Sexual assault and related offences
- Dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons
- Abduction, harassment, and other offences against the person
- Robbery, extortion, and related offences
- Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter
- Theft and related offences
- Fraud, deception, and related offences
- Illicit drug offences
- Prohibited and regulated weapons, and explosives offences
- Property damage and environmental pollution
- Public order offences
- Traffic and vehicle regulatory offences
- Offences against justice procedures, government security, and government operations
- Miscellaneous offences.

Figure 2 shows changes in the crime rate (offences per 10,000 population) for each of these offence categories from 1994-2014. For example, over the 1994-2014 period the crime rate decreased:

- 74.9% for fraud offences;
- 56.9% for homicide offences;
- 56.3% for dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons;
- 45.6% for illicit drug offences;
- 45.3% for burglary offences;

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• 45.1% for theft offences;
• 36.2% for public order offences;
• 26.9% for property offences;
• 20.1% for weapons offences;
• 4.4% for robbery offences.

Figure 2: Changes in Crime Rate by Offence Category 1994-2014

On average, across all offence categories, the total crime rate decreased 37.1% from 1994-2014. However, significant increases in some offence categories also occurred during this period. For example, from 1994-2014 the crime rate increased:

• 6.4% for acts intended to cause injury;
• 23.7% for sexual assaults;
• 25.0% for offences against justice;
• 34.9% for abduction and harassment offences.

Table 1 below sets out the year the lowest and highest crime rates occurred for each offence category. The crime rate is expressed as offences per 10,000 population for calendar years 1994-2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence Category</th>
<th>Year lowest crime rate recorded (rate)</th>
<th>Year highest crime rate recorded (rate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offences against justice</td>
<td>1994 (28.5)</td>
<td>2002 (52.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts intended to cause injury</td>
<td>1999 (76.1)</td>
<td>2009 (105.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault</td>
<td>1999 (5.7)</td>
<td>2014 (9.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abduction and harassment</td>
<td>1999 (24.1)</td>
<td>2009 (33.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery and extortion</td>
<td>1999 (4.6)</td>
<td>2006 (7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous or negligent acts</td>
<td>2005 (1.6)</td>
<td>1994 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>2013 (117.6)</td>
<td>1996 (216.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3 shows that five offence categories were responsible for around 80% of all crime committed in New Zealand in 2014. In 2014 theft offences accounted for over a third (34%) of all offences; burglary 15.2%; property damage 11.5%; acts intended to cause injury 11.4%; and public order offences 7.6%.

By comparison, the share of total offences for the five next most prevalent offence categories accounted for about 17.5% in 2014: illicit drugs (4.7%); offences against justice (4.6%); abduction (4.3%); fraud (2.6%); and weapons offences (1.65%).

The five least prevalent offence categories in 2014 accounted for about 2.5% in 2014: sexual assault (1.2% of total crime); robbery (0.6%); miscellaneous (0.4%); dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons (0.2%); and homicide (0.02%).
Offences – Police Districts

There are 12 police districts in New Zealand, with each district sub-divided into a number of police areas (see Appendix B). In 2014 five police districts accounted for over half (54.8%) of all offences committed in New Zealand. Unsurprisingly these five districts include New Zealand’s largest population centres: Counties-Manukau comprised 12.1% of the total crimes recorded in 2014; Auckland City 12.1%; Canterbury 10.8%; Wellington 10.6%; Waitemata 9.1%.

However, significant differences among police districts emerge when crime rates are used to adjust offence numbers for district population size. Figure 4 shows the crime rate for each police district for the years ending December 1994, 2004, and 2014.

The police districts with the three highest crime rates in both 1994 and 2004 were Auckland City, Eastern, and Bay of Plenty. The police districts with the three highest crime rates in 2014 were Eastern (1085.3), Auckland City (935.2), and Northland (913.4). The Eastern police district in 2014 had a crime rate that was 1.4 times the New Zealand national average (777.0) and 1.9 times the crime rate in the Waitemata police district – the police district with the lowest crime rate in 2014.

In 2014, including the Waitemata police district (previously known as North Shore / Waitakere City) there were five police districts with crime rates below the New Zealand national average (Central, Wellington, Canterbury, Southern, Waitemata). These five police districts, as well as Waikato and Counties-Manukau, had crime rates below the 2004 national average.

Figure 5 shows the percentage changes in the crime rate by police district between 1994 and 2014. Between 1994 and 2014 the national (average) crime rate in New Zealand declined 37.1% to reach a level of 777.0 offences per 10,000 population.

Six police districts recorded better than average declines in the crime rate over the 1994-2014 period: Auckland police district (-45.7%), Southern (-45.3%), Central (-41.9%), Canterbury (-39.9%), Wellington (-39.1%), and Bay of Plenty (-37.7%). While no police district saw a rise in their crime rates over the 1994-2014 period, six police districts recorded lower than average declines in the crime rate: Waikato (-36.7%), Waitematā (-29.9%), Eastern (-28.1%), Counties-Manukau (-27.3%), Northland (-26.2%), and Tasman (-22.4%). The Tasman police district had a crime rate almost 18 percent below the national average in 1994, but by 2014 was just above the New Zealand average.
Victimisation statistics

Beginning in fiscal 2015 (July 2014 – June 2015) the New Zealand police discontinued their statistical series on recorded offences and initiated a new statistical series based on ‘victimisations’. The rationale for moving to victimisations is because of current police strategy that places a strong focus on victims of crime and working with partner agencies to deliver more effective services to victims. The old crime statistics (based on offences) suffered from a combination of factors that limited their value, such as the exclusion of historic offences from the offence statistics, the lack of data on victims, and problems of statistical bias.²

The two statistical series are distinct and comparisons cannot be made between them. Although the victimisation series continues to use the ANZSOC classification of offences, the definition and counting rules for victimisations has fundamentally changed. For example, if on one day, someone reports to police that items had been stolen from them three days in a row, the old crime (offence) statistics would count three offences; the new victimisation series however will count only one victimisation. Or, if on one day, someone reports to police that they had been burgled and assaulted, the new victimisation series will count two victimisations because the two offences are from different crime divisions.³

As a result, even the most basic metric – the crime rate – cannot be compared across the two statistical series. This is not only because of the different counting rules outlined above, but also because the victimisation series excludes crimes for which victims are not usually recorded, such as drugs offences and public order offences. As a result the crime rate for the victimisation series is based on offending in just six of the 16 ANZSOC offence categories (acts intended to cause injury, sexual assaults, abduction and kidnapping, robbery, burglary, theft). Excluded from the victimisation series are the following offence categories: fraud; illicit drugs; weapons and explosives; property damage and environmental pollution; public order; traffic and vehicle regulatory offences; offences against justice; miscellaneous offences. Such offences are however included in a new ‘offender’ statistical series.

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Figure 6 shows the victimisation rates (victimisations per 10,000 population) for the calendar years 2015 to 2017 for the smaller subset of offence categories.

Figure 6: Victimisation rate by Offence category

Figure 7 shows the change in the victimisation rate by offence category between 2015 and 2017 ranked by percentage change. As can be seen only theft victimisations reduced over this period.

Figure 7: Change in victimisation rate 2015-2017

Figure 8 shows the share of victimisations by offence category for 2017. It shows that three offence categories accounted for over 96% of all victimisations in 2017: theft (51%); Burglary (26%); acts intended to cause injury (19%). Please note that while the offence codes are the same, the share of crime victimisations cannot be compared to the share of offences before 2014. This is because total victimisations are recorded from only six offence categories rather than the 16 categories comprising the offence statistics.
Victimisations by Police Districts 2015-2017

Figure 9 shows the combined victimisation rate across six offence categories for each police district for the years 2015 to 2017. The Eastern police district had the highest victimisation rates for 2016 and 2017; its combined victimisation rate in 2017 was 875 victimisations per 10,000 population; this is 1.6 times the 2017 New Zealand national average (558) and 2.6 times the victimisation rate in the Southern police district – the police district with the lowest crime rate in 2017 (336).

In 2017, including the Southern police district, there were five police districts with victimisation rates below the New Zealand national average (Wellington, Canterbury, Tasman, Waitemata and Southern). These five police districts also had below the national average victimisation rates for the previous calendar years (2015 and 2016).

Figure 9: Rates of victimisation by police district
Figure 10 shows the change in the total victimisation rate by police district between 2015 and 2017. Between these years the New Zealand national (average) victimisation rate decreased 0.2% to reach a level of 557.6 victimisations per 10,000 population. Five police districts also recorded declines in the victimisation rate over the 2015 - 2017 period: Auckland City (-19.1%); Canterbury (-6.5%); Waitemata (-6.5%); Wellington (-3.5%); Southern (-3.4%).

However, seven police districts saw higher increases in their victimisation rates over the 2015 - 2017 period than the national average: Tasman (0.8%); Bay of Plenty (1.7%); Northland (2.7%); Counties-Manukau (3.2%); Waikato (12.5%); Central (18.8%); and Eastern (22.0%).

**Summary**

The New Zealand police have discontinued their statistical series on criminal offences and introduced a new statistical series on criminal victimisations. The two series are not comparable and some granular information previously available in the offence series – such as information on methamphetamine drug offences – is no longer available in the new series.

On the other hand, the new victimisation series enables more details about the demographics of those victimised by crime such as their age, gender, and ethnicity. The series also provides data on the relationship of the victim to the offender, such as family member, or stranger. Thus inferences about the extent of family violence are now able to be made with the introduction of the victimisation series. Further updates to the victimisation series will be made by the Parliamentary Library as calendar and fiscal year data becomes available.
Suggestions for further reading/links


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Appendix A: International comparisons of Crime

Meaningful comparisons of crime cannot be made between different jurisdictions for several reasons. Firstly, some OECD jurisdictions – including the USA, Canada, and Australia – do not officially record all the crimes committed in their jurisdictions, seriously diminishing their crime counts in their official statistics. For example, the USA crime figures do not include arson, drug offences, minor assaults, intimidation and threats, while Australian statistics do not include drug or traffic offences. Further, while New Zealand violent crime statistics include all lesser offences such as minor assaults, threats and intimidation (which amount to more than half of all recorded violent crime in New Zealand), the United States and Canada only record serious violent offences in their statistics.\(^9\)

Secondly, offences are counted differently in different jurisdictions. Countries differ in the way they report crimes, on when crimes should be counted, on how multiple offences should be counted, and on whether crime rates should be counted by the number of offences committed or by the number of victims. Where several offences are committed at the same time, in one act of offending, only the most serious offense may be counted. Some jurisdictions record and count each and every offense separately; others count cases, or offenders, that can be prosecuted. Where multiple offenders are involved in the same act of offending only one act may be counted when counting offenses but each offender is counted when apprehended.

For example, the United States, England and Wales, Canada and Ireland record crime according to the number of victims in a criminal incident, in which only the most serious offence in the incident is counted, rather than by the number of offences committed. Australia counts crime by the number of victims of criminal incidents in selected general categories rather than by the number of breaches of the criminal law. Since 2003 Australian national crime statistics have not been collected for assault and sexual assault. Data for these categories were found not to be comparable across all states and territories, because of the different bases on which these offences are recorded. It was found for these offence types, that after incidents had been reported to police the initial investigative processes resulted in inconsistent recording.

Nevertheless, the existing Australian national standard for counting crime also contains the victim data needed in New Zealand. This standard is called Recorded Crime Victim Statistics (RCVS). New Zealand Police was able to adopt Australia’s RCVS with minimal modification. Because of the system enhancements and similar recording standards New Zealand’s new victimisation series is now reasonably comparable with Australia.

In other jurisdictions, offending is counted either at the time it comes to the attention of a law enforcement officer, or the time at which it occurs. Other jurisdictions count offending only when certain processes happen, such as an arrest is made, a ticket issued, charges laid in Court or only upon securing a conviction.

The statistical counting rules regarding the moment when data is collected for the statistics therefore play a major role in the explanation of the crime rates recorded in each country. Although an analysis conducted by Aebi does not prove that cross-national differences in recorded crime are due to the statistical counting rules that apply in each country, it strongly suggests that these rules play a major role in the explanation of those differences.

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\(^9\) As Segessenmann notes: “These differences in counting rules are likely to inflate the apparent violent crime rates of New Zealand in comparison to Canada”. This would also be true when attempting to compare total crime figures.
Appendix B: Police district and general electorate boundaries