

1 Crime in England and Wales 2009/10

An overview of the findings

Introduction

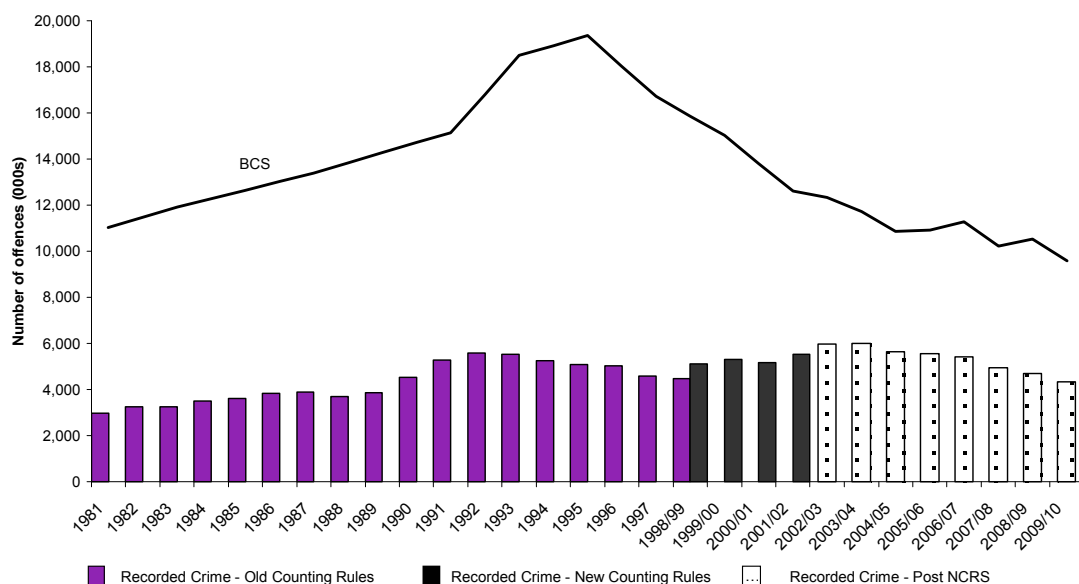
This overview draws out the main themes from the report and considers how the results relate to the broader picture for crime trends internationally. While this is not a systematic review of the literature it discusses possible hypotheses for the reasons behind crime trends to place the results in a better context.

There are two main sources of official statistics on crime: the police recorded series and the British Crime Survey (BCS). The BCS is a nationally representative sample survey (now based on more than 45,000 respondents) of the population resident in households in England and Wales. As a household based survey, the BCS does not cover all offences or all population groups. While police recorded crime has a wider coverage of offences (including crimes such as drug offences that are often termed 'victimless') and covers the entire population, it does not include those crimes not reported to the police. Both sources have their strengths and weaknesses but together provide a more comprehensive picture than either on its own. However, there are some gaps in coverage which need to be borne in mind when interpreting the findings in this report (see below).

Crime trends

For the offence types and population it covers, the BCS is a better measure of long-term trends because it is unaffected by changes in levels of public reporting or in police practice in recording crime. The chart below illustrates overall crime trends from the BCS and police recorded crime and shows overall declines in crime in recent years. However, the police figures are influenced by changes in levels of public reporting and also police recording practice (the chart below indicating important changes in the police series in 1998 and 2002).

Trends in recorded crime and BCS, 1981 to 2009/10



There is a clear pattern from the BCS of crime reaching a peak in 1995 with a subsequent decline, with overall BCS crime down by 50 per cent since 1995. There were important changes in police recording practice in 1998 and 2002 which served to inflate the police figures and resulted in divergence from BCS trends. After the bedding-in of these changes, there has been more convergence in police recorded crime and BCS crime, with trends becoming more similar over the last three to five years.

While estimates for crime from the BCS go back to 1981, the Home Office have figures on crimes recorded by the police going back over more than 100 years¹. However, one problem in interpreting police figures over the long term is our limited knowledge of how public reporting and police recording practices have changed. For example, over the 20th century police recorded crime figures increased more than 70-fold; this will not simply reflect possible changes in levels of offending but will be substantially affected by a range of factors including changes in public reporting, police recording and coverage of new offences as well as increases in population size.

The most striking new finding within this report is that both the 2009/10 BCS and police recorded crime are consistent in showing falls in overall crime compared with 2008/09. Overall BCS crime decreased by nine per cent (from 10.5 million crimes to 9.6 million crimes), and police recorded crime by eight per cent (from 4.7 million to 4.3 million crimes).

These results may be seen as surprising given there were expectations that crime, particularly property related crime, could rise in a period of recession. However, neither source shows an increase in levels of property crime during this period (though the full effects will not show through with the BCS until next year²) and indeed there have been some notable falls. For example, both sources are consistent in showing marked falls in vehicle crime (BCS vehicle-related theft down 17% and police recorded vehicle crime down by 16% compared with the previous year). In addition, while the 9% fall in domestic burglary from the BCS was not statistically significant it is broadly in line with the 6% reduction recorded by the police.

This is also the first time in recent years in which the UK Cards Association have reported a reduction in levels of credit card fraud with a two per cent reduction in the number of fraudulent transactions (down to 2.7 million in 2009 compared with the 2.8 million recorded in 2008) and a 16 per cent fall in UK fraud losses. A supplementary set of questions has been included in the BCS since 2005/06. In line with the UK Cards Association data, these have shown steady rises in the proportion of plastic card users who had been victims of fraud in the last 12 months (up from 3.4% in 2005/06 to 6.4% in 2008/09). However, the latest figures from the 2009/10 BCS are the first to show no increase. It is too early to say whether or not these findings represent a change in recent trends but they are notable nonetheless.

Trends in property crime

The results run counter to expectations based on previously published work on links between the economy and property crime trends (see for example Dhiri and Brand, 1999 and Field, 1990) which suggested that property crime would increase during a recession. The recent trends in property crime are part of a pattern of long term decline with BCS acquisitive crime down by 55 per cent from its peak in 1995. There are a variety of reasons that may account for this and increasing security is an important one. The BCS shows increasing use of home security devices over this period and that these are associated with reduced risk of victimisation. For example, the 2009/10 BCS shows that households with 'less than basic'³ home security measures were six times more likely to have been victims of burglary (5.8%) than households with 'basic' security (0.9%) and ten times more likely than households with

¹ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/recorded-crime-1898-2002.xls>

² Respondents to the 2009/10 BCS were asked about their experience of crime in the 12 months prior to interview and thus the crime reference period spans from April 2008 (3-6 months before the recession started) through to March 2010.

³ 'Basic' home security refers to households fitted with window locks and double locks or deadlocks to outside doors.

'enhanced' home security measures (0.6%). Similarly, levels of vehicle security have also been enhanced in the period since 1995. Car manufacturers now fit immobilisers and other security features as standard to many of their models and such cars form a far greater share of the total stock than they did ten to 15 years ago.

International crime trends

The general pattern of property crime declining also coincides with the picture seen in many other developed economies. For example, property crime rates in the United States fell by 32% over the period between 1999 and 2008 according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Rand, 2009) with a similar downward trend in police recorded crime.

The International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) provides some data up to 2004 (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2008) on victimisation levels for a number of developed countries. It suggests that, in general, crime increased between 1988 and 1991 with a downward trend since 1996 across the developed world. The EU, Canada and Australia show similar trends with a "turning point" during the early to mid-1990s while in the US crime has decreased since 1988. However, the last ICVS showed England and Wales to have one of the highest levels of property crime, despite falling crime levels, though it should be recognised that this is a finding from a survey in 2004.

There are competing hypotheses and no single definitive explanation for the fall in crimes and it seems likely that a number of different factors have contributed, in different ways, although there is broad support for the impact of improved vehicle and household security. The wide range of explanations include: the presence of CCTV in car parks, local crime reduction initiatives, reductions in the real value of many household items, social change and controls, a strong economy, improvements in police performance and increases in police numbers (the latter being cited by Vollaard and Hamed, 2009). Farrell *et al.* (2010) discuss competing theories for declining crime trends and offer a range of alternative hypotheses including more speculative ones such as car crime being a key 'debut crime' such that vehicle crimes have become more difficult with improved car security which has generally inhibited criminal careers. They also identify emerging forms of crime (e.g. internet-related including e-commerce) that are not adequately captured in police figures or existing survey based measures.

Farrington *et al.* (2004) discussed crime trends within an edited collection of contributed chapters from a range of western countries. Again one of the most striking aspects of this is the wide range of disparate explanations, with, for example, similar downward crime trends in the US and Canada being explained in quite different terms (in the US prison incarceration was seen as a significant factor but this was discounted in Canada). This is echoed in Aebi *et al.* (1999) where no relationship had been found between the size of the prison population in a country and the level of recorded crime.

Turning specifically to violent crime, for EU member states, violent crimes recorded by the police rose annually on average by three per cent between 1998 and 2007 (Tavares and Thomas, 2009), while in the US victimisation survey serious violence fell by 42 per cent between 1998 and 2007. The larger fall in England and Wales over the same period must again be seen in the context that the ICVS indicated that England and Wales had in 2004 one of the highest levels of violent crime among developed countries, though of course this now represents a rather dated comparative picture. There is not the same possible range of explanations of violent crime declines as for property crime (e.g. in terms of factors such as increased security).

Trends in violent crime

Violent crime contains a wide range of offences, from minor assaults such as pushing and shoving that result in no physical harm through to serious incidents of wounding and murder. In around a half of incidents identified as 'violent crime' by both BCS and police statistics, the violence involves no injury to the victim.

The BCS has adopted a consistent methodology over time and it is unaffected by changes in levels of reporting and recording of crime. Thus for the population groups and crime types it covers it is a better measure of long-term trends in violent crime than the police recorded crime series, which has been particularly affected by changes in the recording of violence against the person. However, there are some specific subcategories of violence not well covered in the main BCS crime count (such as homicide and sexual offences, see below).

There was not a statistically significant change in the number of violent crimes estimated by the 2009/10 BCS as compared with 2008/09 (the apparent 1% decrease was not statistically significant). However, over recent years there has been an overall reduction in violent crime estimated by the BCS, consistent with trends in police recorded crime. Police recorded violence against the person fell by four per cent between 2008/09 and 2009/10. Longer-term trends from the BCS show violent crime down by 50 per cent from its peak in 1995.

Homicide

The BCS does not measure homicide but it is well covered by the police figures as it is likely that relatively few homicides do not come to police attention. In 2009/10, the police recorded 615 homicides, down six per cent on the previous year (numbers are small for homicide but this figure would be judged to be statistically significantly below the final Homicide Index figure for 2007/08 of 753). The 2009/10 figures should be seen as provisional as the Homicide Index (see Smith *et al.*, 2010) provides the definitive count for homicide, taking account of factors such as court decisions and deaths some time after an assault. However, these figures do suggest that in January 2011, when final figures are available, we may be reporting the lowest level of homicides since 1997/98 (the homicide levels in the 1990s and 1980s were not dissimilar to those that apply now, though they are higher than for much of the 1960s when homicides were generally below 400 per year).

Results in Tavares and Thomas (2009) indicate that England and Wales has a homicide rate close to the average for EU countries at 1.4 per 100,000 population, with falls in homicide in most countries in the decade prior to 2007. The England and Wales figure remains well below the US homicide rate of 5.6 per 100,000 population despite figures both here and in the US having fallen in recent years (see discussion in Smith *et al.*, 2010).

Sexual offences

The BCS does not include estimates of the number of sexual offences in its main crime count. However, it does provide estimates of the proportion of adults who have been a victim of such offences, which are obtained through a supplementary set of questions answered by self-completion outside the main interview. This shows that, according to the 2009/10 BCS, approximately two per cent of women aged 16 to 59 and less than one per cent of men (of the same age) had experienced a sexual assault (including attempts) in the previous 12 months. The majority of these are accounted for by less serious sexual assaults. There were no changes in the overall prevalence of sexual assaults between 2008/09 and 2009/10.

There were 54,509 sexual offences recorded by the police in 2009/10, a six per cent increase compared with 2008/09. This increase needs, however, to be interpreted with caution. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has been taking steps to enhance the recording of serious sexual offences and this has culminated in inclusion of good practice guidance in the Home Office Counting Rules for crime from April 2010. While these were not formally in place in 2009/10, it may well be that figures for 2009/10 reflect initiatives undertaken by forces over the last year as they anticipated their introduction.

Guns and knives

There has been increasing public concern in recent years about gun and knife crime. While disturbing, the number of such crimes is relatively low and in a general population sample survey such as the BCS the number of victims is too small to produce reliable trend

estimates. Additional data collections from the police provide better information on the number of such offences but cover only those that have come to the attention of the police.

Provisional figures show that 7,995 firearm offences (representing 0.2% of all offences) were recorded in England and Wales in 2009/10, a three per cent decrease from 2008/09. This is in the context of firearm offences now being 22 per cent below the level in 2002/03, this being largely driven by reductions in imitation firearms rather than handguns and other firearms.

A special collection of knife crime data from the police was started in 2007/08 but comparable data are only available for the last two years. In 2009/10, for the selected offences⁴, the police recorded 33,566 offences (representing around 6% of the total offences in the selected categories and 0.8% of all offences) where a knife or sharp instrument was involved, a fall of seven per cent from the previous year.

There are two additional sources of knife crime data presented in this bulletin: one covering the number of admissions to NHS hospitals in England involving wounds suffered as the result of assault with a sharp object and the other an annual survey covering a sample of Emergency Departments and Walk-in Centres in England and Wales. Although these figures can be affected by changes in NHS practice and recording, as well as the propensity of the public to seek treatment, they are not likely to be affected by police enforcement activity (or by public reporting to the police, or police recording practices).

The provisional 'Hospital Episode Statistics' for admissions show that in the 12 months from March 2009 to February 2010 there were 4,708 admissions for assault by a sharp object in England, four per cent less than the same period the previous year. This is in line with decreases seen in police recorded crime and the BCS, though hospital admissions will only involve the more serious incidents covered by these sources.

The latest survey in 2009 of Emergency Departments showed little change in violence-related attendances in 2009 compared with 2008 (there was an overall decrease of less than one per cent). Longer-term trends from this study have tended to reflect BCS trends in violence since 2002 when the Emergency Department survey started.

Variation in risk of victimisation

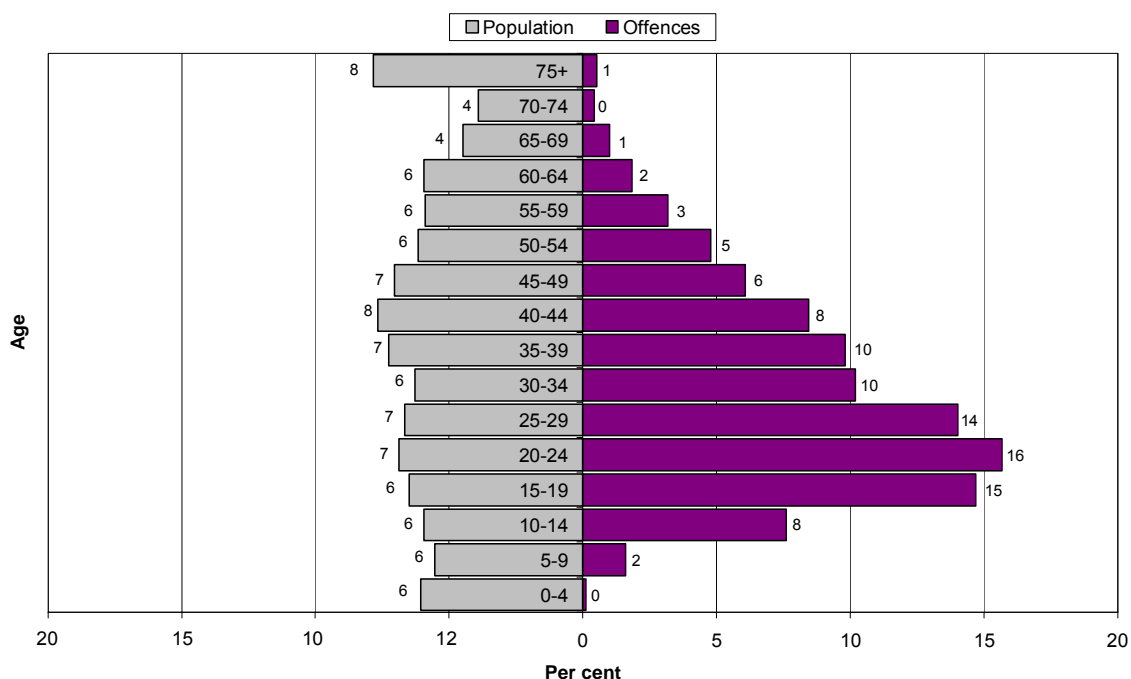
Another important finding that has emerged from both BCS and police recorded crime figures over the years is the very uneven nature of victimisation in terms of both personal and area characteristics. For example, the BCS shows that young men face a higher risk of being a victim of stranger violence (2.2% of men compared with 0.6% of women); and that women are at greater risk of domestic abuse (7% of women aged 16 to 59 were victims in the past year compared with 4% of men). With regard to area, the 2009/10 BCS shows the risk of being a victim of any household crime was higher for households living in urban than rural areas (18% compared with 12%).

The police recorded crime series also show disparities between urban and rural areas, with higher population density tending to be associated with higher crime levels. Robbery and knife crime are concentrated in particular urban areas. For example in 2009/10, 62 per cent of robberies in England and Wales were recorded by just three forces, the Metropolitan Police, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, which cover 24 per cent of the population.

The chart overleaf shows the disproportional nature of victimisation of police recorded firearm offences with younger people (aged 15 to 29 in particular) over-represented and those in the oldest age groups under-represented.

⁴ Attempted murder, GBH with intent, GBH without intent, robbery, threats to kill, ABH, sexual assault and rape.

Age profile of victims of recorded crimes involving firearms other than air weapons, compared to population profile for England and Wales, 2009/10



Gaps in coverage of crime statistics

In some respects gaps in the BCS or police recorded crime are complementary and, to some extent, each covers gaps in the other source. For example, the BCS includes crimes experienced by the population resident in households that are not reported to the police. In contrast, while the BCS does not cover homicide, we believe few of these offences are not recorded by the police. However, in some respects neither series provides full coverage.

A key question that arises is whether new forms of offending are adequately captured within the BCS and police recorded crime series. An example where police recorded crime and the main BCS crime count are deficient is plastic card fraud. While the police recorded 27,139 plastic card fraud offences in 2009/10, we know this represents only a small fraction of criminal activity in this area (as described above).

Another area where counting crime is difficult is drug offending. We know that the proactivity of the police in tackling such offences is a major factor in the numbers of drug offences they record. However, it is likely a substantial amount of drug offences do not come to the attention of the police. While the BCS does ask questions on illegal drug usage via a self-report questionnaire this does not provide a complete measure of levels of offending in this area (e.g. in the supply of drugs).

It also should be acknowledged that the BCS has until recently only provided a picture of crime for those aged over 16 resident in households. Recently experimental statistics were released for user consultation (Millard and Flatley, 2010). Based on interviews in the year ending December 2009, this estimated between 400,000 and 2.2 million incidents of personal crimes (ranging from victim perceived to the broadest 'all in law' measure) against children aged 10 to 15. There are no trend data for these figures, and it is acknowledged that many of these incidents would be considered very minor (only 11 per cent were said to have been reported to the police). These results do, however, illustrate that patterns of offending and behaviour that can lead to significant personal distress are not fully captured in the police recorded crime or the current BCS main series.

In considering crime trends, particularly trends for offences against the person, it is worth noting that the recording of incidents that fall short of crime has not been fully developed. The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) has undertaken collection of incident data from the police and reported in 2009 that there had been 3.7 million recorded incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB) in 2008/09⁵, which compares with 4.7 million recorded crimes over the same period.

Measurement of incident data is inherently difficult, particularly given that often it is not possible to corroborate details as is normal when a crime is recorded (police incident data does not have the *National Statistics* designation that applies to crime). It should also be noted that much ASB may be reported to the local authority (e.g. noisy neighbours) and may therefore not come to the attention of the police. There may also be multiple reporting of the same incident to different authorities (e.g. both police and local council). The BCS has something to offer in terms of public perceptions of ASB but it is certainly the case that our knowledge of the nature and impact of these incidents is not as well understood as for crime.

The UK Statistics Authority in their recent report on *Overcoming Barriers to Trust in Crime Statistics* (UK Statistics Authority, 2010) recommend the development of a conceptual framework for crime and criminal justice statistics which will address gaps, discrepancies and discontinuities in coverage.

Public perceptions and trust in crime statistics

An important aspect of the BCS is the ability to ask respondents questions on crime-related topics as well as about their direct experience of crime. The 2009/10 BCS continues to show that a large proportion of people (66%) believe crime has risen across the country as a whole in the last few years. There has been a large majority of respondents thinking crime has risen at a national level since the questions were first included in 1996 and this has been consistent throughout the period in which BCS crime has fallen. Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest this demonstrates the public don't believe the official crime statistics.

However, when asked about their local area, much lower proportions of people think crime has risen (though as with the national picture relatively small proportions think crime has fallen). The BCS also shows that around half of the public believe that they live in a lower than average crime area (51%) with 39 per cent thinking they live in an area with an average level of crime and just ten per cent in a high crime area. This suggests that the public have a more realistic view of crime in their local area.

Surveys have shown public trust in crime statistics and other official statistics is low and that many people believe there to be political interference in the production of statistics (Bailey *et al*, 2010). However, in their recent review the UK Statistics Authority commented that they had "not seen any evidence of political interference in the production of the aggregate National Statistics on crime and we are satisfied that the Home Office statisticians responsible for this work are fully committed to maintaining that integrity". As the Authority noted "distrust often arises from the way the statistics are used and quoted after they have been released." Further, in the survey commissioned by the Authority, cited above levels of trust in crime statistics were on a par with other National Statistics such as unemployment and inflation.

The recommendations of the UK Statistics Authority review are being given careful consideration. It is important that we further develop our statistical reporting to meet the needs of users, including working with the police to assist them with respect to their local reporting. In doing this, we will also heavily rely on the integrity and hard work of those who collect information in the field, both BCS interviewers and police staff.

⁵ Parliamentary Reply, Hansard reference, volume 497, column 836-840, 2008/09.