



Crime Trends in New South Wales: The Crime Victim Survey Picture

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INTRODUCTION

There are two main sources of information about crime trends in New South Wales (NSW): offences recorded by the NSW Police Service and offences revealed in an annual crime victim survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), namely the NSW Crime and Safety Survey. Police crime statistics receive the lion's share of media attention, in part because they tend to show more dramatic changes in crime rates from year to year than the NSW Crime and Safety Survey. But police crime statistics are not always a reliable guide to crime trends. They can be strongly influenced by changes in the willingness of people to report crime and by changes in policing priorities and effectiveness. These problems cannot be overcome for all offences. But for some of the most common household and personal offences the Crime and Safety Survey arguably provides a more reliable guide to actual crime trends than trends in crime recorded by police. It also provides a much more accurate picture of the true risk of becoming a victim of certain kinds of crime. The purpose of this bulletin is to provide a simple and accessible summary of some of the more salient features of the findings of the NSW Crime and Safety Survey over the last few years.

BACKGROUND TO SURVEY

The survey collects information about experience of crime throughout the previous 12 months from a representative sample of about 6,500 NSW households involving some 13,000 individuals.¹ The survey has been conducted annually (in April) since 1990. The survey questionnaire is designed for self-completion. Prior to 1997 the

questionnaires were delivered by interviewers to the selected households (being those private dwellings sampled by the ABS Monthly Population Survey). In 1997 the questionnaires were mailed to most households. Completed questionnaires are returned to the ABS by mail. Each person aged 15 years and over is asked to complete a survey form dealing with personal crimes (assault and robbery). One questionnaire per household includes additional questions about household crime (break and enter and motor vehicle theft). Women aged 18 and over are given an additional questionnaire relating to sexual assault.

As well as the information on criminal victimisations in the preceding 12 months, the survey collects a range of other information about respondents, including their age and gender, whether they reported any crime they experienced to the police, and which forms of crime, if any, they are most concerned about in their neighbourhood.

The survey has undergone several changes in its structure and wording since its introduction. The questions relating to motor vehicle theft and sexual assault were added to the survey in 1992. The survey was altered in 1996 when investigations by the ABS revealed that a large number of respondents who were actually victims of assault or some form of theft were mistakenly reporting that they had been victims of robbery.² This confusion about the definition of robbery resulted in a significant overestimate of the incidence of robbery in NSW between 1990 and 1995. The change in the definition of robbery used in the survey means that robbery data collected in 1996 and 1997 are, unfortunately, not comparable with data collected from the survey in previous years.

RESULTS

VICTIMISATION RATES

Break and enter

Each household respondent involved in the survey is asked if their home has been broken into in the previous 12 months. The term 'home', for the purposes of the survey, includes a garage or shed but excludes the car and garden area. Figure 1 shows the trend in victimisation rates for home break and enter offences in NSW from 1990 to 1997.

Figure 1: Victimisation rates for break and enter, NSW, 1990-1997

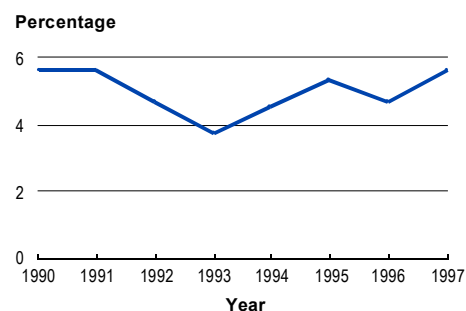


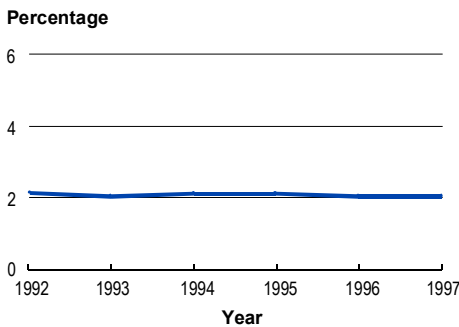
Figure 1 shows that the victimisation rate for break and enter fell to 3.7 per cent in 1993, but by 1997 was at approximately the same rate as during the early 1990s. The stability of victimisation rates for break and enter may appear surprising to many people considering the media attention given to home invasions. Although the media tend to depict home invasions as a form of break and enter they are best understood as a form of robbery (a more serious crime involving violence or the threat of violence). Unlike break and enter, home invasions are

relatively rare events. New South Wales has well over two million households. Last year about 180 of these experienced a home invasion whereas over 130,000 experienced a break and enter.

Motor vehicle theft

The survey asks each household respondent whether anyone in the household has been a victim of motor vehicle theft in the past 12 months. Figure 2 shows the victimisation rate for motor vehicle theft in NSW from 1992 to 1997. The victimisation rate has remained remarkably stable throughout the six-year survey period, with approximately two per cent of households experiencing an incident of motor vehicle theft in each 12-month period.

Figure 2: Victimization rates for motor vehicle theft, NSW, 1992-1997



Robbery

The survey currently classifies robbery as a personal crime where someone has an item stolen from them in an incident that involved a threat or an attack. It excludes incidents of attempted robbery where someone attempted to steal from the victim but nothing was actually taken. Figure 3 shows the trends in robbery victimisation in NSW from 1990 to 1995 and 1996 to 1997. The trend line is discontinuous to indicate that the change in the definition of robbery in 1996 means that robbery data from 1996 onwards are not comparable with earlier robbery data.

Figure 3: Victimization rates for robbery, NSW, 1990-1997

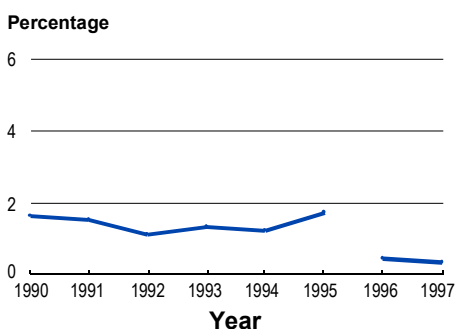


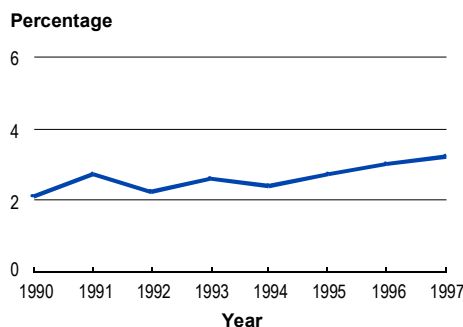
Figure 3 provides little evidence of any systematic upward or downward trend in robbery victimisation before the change in question wording. The corrected rates for 1996 and 1997 (0.4 per cent and 0.3 per cent respectively) show the extreme rarity of robbery under the corrected definition. It is too soon to tell whether there is any upward or down trend in robbery under the corrected definition.

It is important to note that the majority of robberies do not involve a weapon, and that the proportion of robberies involving a firearm is relatively small. In 1997 over 65 per cent of the respondents to the survey who had been a victim of a robbery indicated that there was no weapon used in that robbery incident. Of those robbery incidents involving a weapon, the most common weapon used was a knife. Approximately 23 per cent of respondents who were victims of a robbery indicated that a knife was used in the robbery. Less than 3 per cent of robbery victims surveyed indicated that a firearm had been used in the robbery incident.

Assault

The survey requires respondents to indicate whether they have been a victim of threatened or actual assault over the previous 12-month period. Figure 4 shows the trend in the victimisation rate for this category of crime from 1990 to 1997. The graph suggests that there may have been an increase in the victimisation rate for assault from 1994 onward.

Figure 4: Victimization rates for assault, NSW, 1990-1997

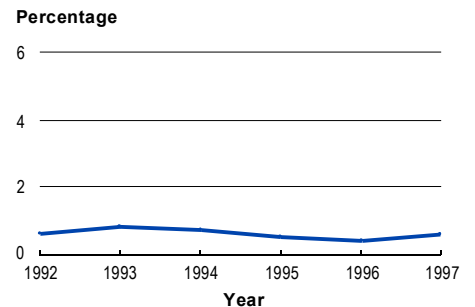


Sexual assault

Information on sexual assault victimisation has been collected since 1992 and is gathered only from female respondents of 18 years and over. The definition of sexual assault used in the survey includes rape, attempted rape, indecent assault, attempted indecent assault and assault with intent to sexually assault, but excludes sexual harassment.

Figure 5 shows the trend in the sexual assault victimisation rate in NSW for women aged 18 and over from 1992 to 1997.

Figure 5: Victimization rates for sexual assault, NSW, 1992-1997



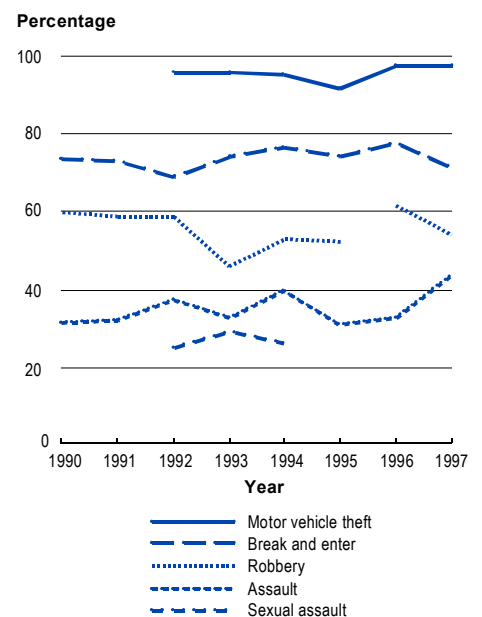
As can be seen from Figure 5, the victimisation rate for sexual assault has remained under one per cent throughout the six-year period. There have been slight fluctuations in the victimisation rates over the six-year period with the rate reaching 0.8 per cent in 1993 compared with 0.4 per cent in 1996.

REPORTING TO POLICE

The survey asks respondents who have been a victim of a crime in the previous 12 months if they reported the incident to the police. Figure 6 shows the proportion of victims in NSW from 1990 to 1997 who told the police about the last incident, by type of offence.

There are two points about Figure 6 worth noting. Firstly, there are large variations in

Figure 6: Proportion of victims who told police about last incident by type of offence, NSW, 1990-1997³



the willingness of victims of crime to report their victimisation to police. Whereas nearly 100 per cent of victims of motor vehicle theft report the offence to police, less than 30 per cent of female victims of sexual assault (aged 18 years and over) report the offence to police.⁴ Secondly, for some offences (e.g. robbery and assault) there is considerable variation over time in the willingness of victims to report the crime to police. In the case of assault, for example, the variation ranges from about 30 per cent of assaults reported to police in 1995 to about 43 per cent of assaults reported to police in 1997, just two years later. This sort of change is particularly noteworthy because a small change in the percentage of persons reporting prevalent offences, such as assault, to police represents a very large change in the number of assaults reported.

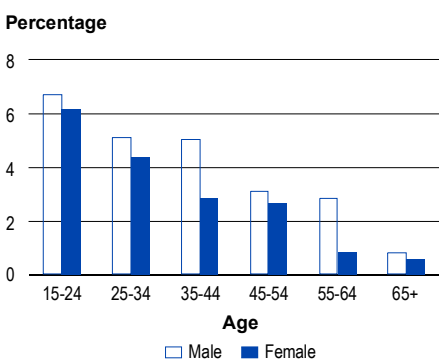
VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

As noted earlier, victim surveys not only provide us with a clearer picture of the prevalence of certain kinds of crime, they also provide us with a clearer picture of the risks of crime for certain groups within the population. Figure 7, for example, shows crime victimisation rates for personal crime in NSW in 1997 by age and gender.⁵

Males in each age group were more likely than females to be a victim of a personal crime, with the largest difference in victimisation rates occurring in the 35-44 years age group (where 5.0 per cent of males and 2.8 per cent of females were victims).

Figure 7 also shows that personal crime victimisation rates vary with age. Persons in the 15-24 years age group were the most likely to have been a victim of a personal crime, while persons aged 65 years and over were the least likely to be a victim of personal crime. These

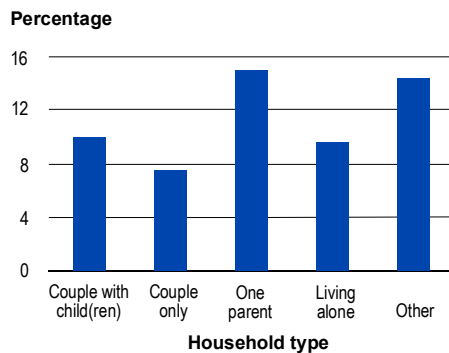
Figure 7: Victims of personal crime by age and gender, NSW, 1997



differences in victimisation risk associated with age and gender probably reflect lifestyle differences. Young men are likely to spend more time socialising at high crime-risk times in high-risk places compared with women in the same age group and with elderly men and women.

The survey also shows that household type affects risk of victimisation for household crime. Figure 8 shows victimisation rates for household crime by type of household in NSW in 1997.⁶

Figure 8: Victims of household crime by household type, NSW, 1997

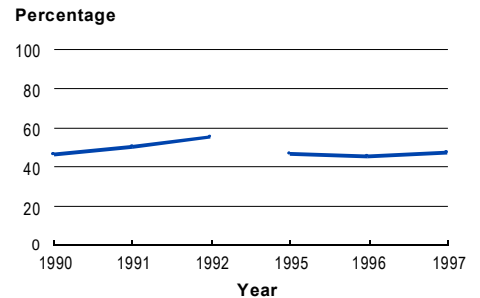


Households consisting of one parent families are most at risk of household crime, followed by 'other' (such as share accommodation) household types. Households consisting of couples without children have the lowest victimisation rate. Note that the fact that sole parent households have the highest household victimisation risks does not necessarily mean that being a sole parent increases the likelihood of household victimisation. The higher risks faced by sole parent families may stem from the fact that many live in economically impoverished neighbourhoods which are more crime-prone.

Apart from the questions it contains on crime, the NSW Crime and Safety Survey also asks respondents whether they believe there is a crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood and, if so, what the main perceived problem is. Figure 9 shows, for 1990 to 1992 and 1995 to 1997, the proportion of residents in NSW who did not perceive any crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood.⁷ The results are somewhat surprising. It is clear from Figure 9 that the proportion of people who do not perceive any crime or public nuisance problems in their neighbourhood has remained both high (i.e. at least 45 per cent) and stable throughout the period in question.

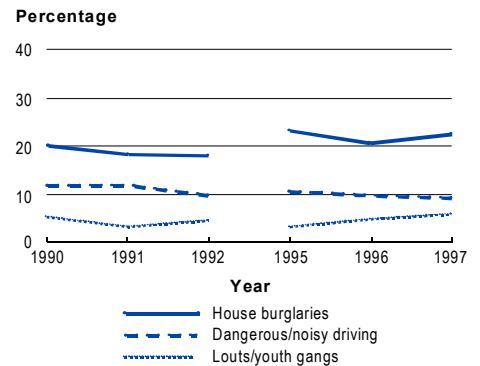
Amongst those who perceive a crime

Figure 9: Proportion of residents who did not perceive a crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood, NSW, 1990-1992 and 1995-1997



problem in their neighbourhood, three main problems have topped the list of public concerns since the survey began. These are house burglary, dangerous/noisy driving and louts/youth gangs. For each of these three problems, Figure 10 shows the trend in the proportion of residents in NSW who identify that problem to be the main problem in their neighbourhood.

Figure 10: Proportion of residents who perceive household burglary, dangerous/noisy driving or louts/youth gangs to be the main problem in their neighbourhood, NSW, 1990-1992 and 1995-1997



As with the proportion of respondents who perceived no crime or public nuisance problem, there has been little change in the proportions of residents nominating household burglaries, dangerous/noisy driving and louts/youth gangs as the main crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood.

DISCUSSION

The relative stability of crime as revealed in the NSW Crime and Safety Survey contrasts sharply with trends in crime recorded by police over the last two years. As the annual recorded crime statistics report recently released by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research shows,⁸ police statistics on

recorded rates of offences such as household break and enter, motor vehicle theft and robbery, have all shown significant increases between January 1996 and December 1997. There are several possible reasons for the discrepancy. Firstly, the 12-month period covered by the victim survey never coincides precisely with that covered by police statistics. Secondly, it is possible that some of the increase in crime recorded by police over the last twelve months has come about through increased willingness to report crime. Thirdly, although police statistics on offences such as robbery have increased significantly, victim survey data show that the offence itself remains comparatively rare. For this reason victim surveys would have difficulty detecting an upward trend.

Overall, then, the victim survey data show that the risk of crime is much lower than many people imagine and, for most offence categories, has not changed substantially over the last few years.

However despite their value, it is neither possible nor desirable to rely solely on crime victim surveys for information about crime trends and patterns. It is too expensive and impractical to use crime victim surveys to obtain precise estimates of the prevalence of relatively infrequent crimes because the sample size would have to be extremely large to get sufficient numbers of victims. Similarly, it is impractical to use crime victim surveys to compare differences between small areas in the prevalence of various types of crime. For some offences, moreover, (e.g. homicide, armed robbery of commercial premises) police records provide a highly reliable guide to the incidence of crime. The NSW Crime and Safety Survey should therefore be seen as a valuable adjunct to police crime data rather than as an alternative to it. This said, the survey is a source of information about crime which deserves more attention in the media than it often receives.

NOTES

- 1 The results are based on the responses of approximately 5,000 households and 10,400 persons.
- 2 Robbery, properly understood, is an offence which involves either violence or the threat of violence. Theft, which does not involve violence or the threat of violence, is a separate offence.
- 3 Reporting rates for sexual assault incidents from 1995 to 1997 were not included due to the small size of the sample. Care should be taken in the interpretation of the sexual assault figures shown as they are based on small samples of respondents and as such are subject to large sampling errors.
- 4 See note 3 above.
- 5 Personal crimes here include robbery, assault and sexual assault.
- 6 In Figure 8 household crime includes break and enter, attempted break and enter and motor vehicle theft.
- 7 Note, there are no data for 1993 or 1994 because the question was not asked in those years.
- 8 NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1998, *New South Wales Recorded Crime Statistics 1997*, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

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