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In reply please quote:

Release date: 1 December 1997

MEDIA RELEASE

Commentary on ABS Crime and Safety Survey - 1997

Rates of break and enter have increased in New South Wales but rates of personal crime have remained stable over the last twelve months, according to the latest NSW Crime and Safety Survey.

This is despite the fact that police have recorded significant increases in the number of assault and robbery offences over the same period.

The Crime and Safety Survey is conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and is based on questionnaires completed by a representative sample of approximately 10,000 NSW residents.

Because the Crime and Safety Survey measures the incidence of crime regardless of whether or not it has been reported to police, it provides a more reliable guide to trends in the major personal and household offences than police statistics.

The survey results show that in the 12 months to April 1997 compared with the 12 months to April 1996:

- There was a 22 per cent increase in the percentage of households experiencing a break and enter.
- The percentage of households experiencing a motor vehicle theft remained stable at two per cent.
- The percentage of persons experiencing an assault remained stable at around three per cent.
- The percentage of persons experiencing a robbery remained stable at less than one per cent.
- The percentage of persons experiencing a sexual assault remained stable at less than one per cent.

Although the risk of assault in New South Wales has not increased, the pattern of assaults across New South Wales appears to have changed. There has been a slight (albeit not statistically significant) decrease in the risk of assault in Sydney and a significant increase in the risk of assault in the rest of New South Wales.

The ABS report also shows a significant increase in the estimated number of persons who have no perceived crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood. In 1996, an estimated 2.1 million NSW residents did not perceive any crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood. In 1997 this rose to 2.2 million.

Although the percentage of persons assaulted in NSW did not increase between 1996 and 1997, victims of assault have become more willing to report the offence to police.

Thirty-two per cent of assault victims reported the offence to police in 1996. In 1997 this figure rose to 43 per cent.

Commenting on the findings, the Director of the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, said that the ABS survey figures concerning break and enter closely follow the recorded crime trends for this offence and indicate that rates of break and enter have returned to the level they were at in the early 1990s.

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For other offences, however, the ABS survey figures stand in stark contrast to police crime statistics.

Between the calendar years 1995 and 1996 police recorded significant increases in motor vehicle theft, assault, sexual assault and robbery. The ABS survey shows that in fact none of these offences significantly increased over this period.

There may be several reasons why police are recording significant increases in crime at the moment. In the case of assault there appears to have been a big increase in the willingness of assault victims to report the offence to police. The new COPS system may also be capturing more of the offences reported to police.

For relatively rare offences, however, (e.g. armed robbery) the ABS survey is probably not the best instrument for detecting crime trends.

Further enquiries:

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