International Crime Trends: Sources of Comparative Crime Data and Post-War Trends in Western Europe\textsuperscript{1}

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Published as:

\textsuperscript{1} This chapter is mainly based on Estrada (1999, 2001) and Westfelt (2001).
1. Introduction

Comparative analyses of crime trends show that the level of crime has increased in practically all West European countries during the post-war period (e.g. Gurr 1978; Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Smith 1995; Westfelt 2001). There are however a number of problems associated with the study of crime over a period of several decades. The task is not made easier by the additional cross-national comparative element. Official crime statistics are the most accessible source of data and therefore also that which the majority of comparative analyses are based on. As we will show in this chapter, however, their use is problematical. Our knowledge of longitudinal changes in reporting behaviour, as well as judicial and policing practices, is all too often unsystematic and incomplete. It is therefore wise to nourish a healthy scepticism in the face of claims that crime statistics actually describe ‘real’ crime trends.

The aim of the chapter is to present and discuss the available data relating to crime trends in West European countries during the post-war period (1950-1999). The first section opens with a discussion of different methodological approaches for the study of international crime trends. The next section examines sources of comparative crime data such as Interpol and The International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS). We outline the availability, strengths and weaknesses of various kinds of official and alternative crime data. Thereafter we illustrate a number of the methodological issues involved in using empirical data on crime trends in Western Europe. Here, three sub-sections deal specifically with the overall crime trend, and trends in violent crime and youth crime.

2. Methodological issues for comparative analyses of crime trends

This section examines some methodological issues associated with comparative research in crime trends. The first relates to the choice of countries to be included in the comparison, the second to the collection of data and the third to the type of data that are to be employed.

2.1 The most similar vs. the most different approach

As regards the question of which countries are suitable for comparison, there are two fundamental approaches. The "most different" approach looks to include countries whose structure and culture are as unlike one another as possible, whereas the "most similar" approach seeks to compare countries that are alike one another in these regards (cf. Teune 1979; Marshall & Marshall 1983; McClintock & Wikström 1987; Lieberson 1991; Tranøy 1993). The literature contains a number of different recommendations as to when one of these methods is to be preferred over the other. The "most different" method is often deemed appropriate where the approach is more deductive and where the objective is to test the generalisability of a given theory. When the objective is instead to build up a theory by means of induction, the "most similar" approach is recommended (Marshall & Marshall 1983). According to McClintock & Wikström (1987) the "most different" approach may be preferable where theories are to be examined by means of hypothesis testing. When findings with relevance for crime policy are sought, on the other hand, the "most similar" approach
may be more appropriate. In addition, these authors suggest that in the context of a policy study, it may be of interest to examine the different ways in which countries deal with crime whereas in a "theoretical study" interest is focused more on how differences between countries are associated with variations in crime.

When it comes to explaining similarities and differences, it has been suggested that the correct choice will depend on the outcome of the dependent variable. If, for example one is looking to explain a difference in crime trends (the dependent variable), then a sample of countries that are similar to one another in other respects (independent variables) is appropriate since, in theory, this allows one to ignore these similarities and to limit the number of differences that might be chosen as possible explanations.\(^2\)

Similarly, the "most different" approach is to be preferred when it is similarities in the dependent variable that are to be explained. This approach then minimises the congruencies that might possibly explain the similarities in the dependent variable. In a situation where the outcome on the dependent variable is unknown and itself constitutes the objective of the initial phase of a study, this line of reasoning cannot of course be applied. In the context of a broad study involving a large number of countries, the "most similar" strategy might be employed in connection with the initial sample, after which different methods or approaches may be used to guide subsequent, smaller samples (Tranøy 1993, p. 27).

### 2.2 Meta-studies

A sensible way to begin a comparative study is to take advantage of the analyses already carried out by researchers in the relevant countries; i.e. a to conduct a kind of meta-analysis. It is reasonable after all to assume that such researchers know a good deal about the factors which affect their domestic crime statistics. The validity of a meta-study will depend upon whether its conclusions are grounded in adequate descriptions of crime trends in the various countries included. It is vital that these descriptions are sufficiently representative. The issue is the degree to which the studies referred to contain all the relevant information available in the countries in question. Researchers often have differing opinions. How are we to know that the researchers whose studies form the basis for the meta-analyses are those whose work best represents the available research in these countries? The honest answer is that we can’t be certain. Insofar as researchers have similar chances of getting their analyses published, a review of databases ought to produce a reasonably undistorted sample. One might still object that analyses of national crime trends are often not intended for an international audience, and that they are therefore rarely published in international scientific journals. An important part of a comparative meta-analysis therefore involves contacting researchers from the different countries in order to improve the availability of relevant data. Meta-studies are of necessity based on data that was produced for other purposes. For this reason the indicators used and the periods studied often vary to a certain extent between the different countries.

### 2.3 Available data

\(^2\)This might be described as amounting to an automatic "standardisation" of variables.
2.3.1 Crime statistics

The study of crime trends over the post-war period requires indicators that extend over time of course. Official crime statistics constitute the only available systematic source of data of this kind. The primary sources of international crime statistics are Interpol, HEUNI (UN), WHO (UN) and the Council of Europe (Newman 1999). Whilst a number of countries have conducted victim surveys with the objective of charting the general population’s experience of criminal victimisation, comparing data across these surveys is difficult, and the furthest these data extend back in time is to the mid 1970s. It is only since the end of the 1980s that attempts have been made to produce internationally comparable victim surveys (van Dijk, Mayhew & Killias 1990; van Dijk & Mayhew 1993; Mayhew & van Dijk 1997; van Kesteren, Mayhew & Nieuwbeerta 2000).

The validity of official crime statistics as an indicator of both crime trends and the amount of crimes committed has been discussed at length within the field of criminological research. The problems associated with the dark figure, i.e. the relationship between the number of reported offences and the "actual" number of offences committed, as well as those associated with changes in legislation and policy, are well known within the field and must be given due consideration. One general conclusion as to the validity of official crime statistics for which the literature provides substantial support is that (police) statistics provide a better picture of trends in serious (traditional) offending, which is to say that the relatively large proportion of unreported crimes are to a substantial extent comprised of offences where the value of the loss or damage involved is low and/or where physical injuries are minor (e.g. Huang 1993; Coleman & Moynihan 1996).

Comparing crime statistics across different countries does nothing to reduce the level of problems associated with this indicator. Some researchers are highly sceptical about the possibilities of carrying out such comparisons (e.g. Scott & Al-Thakeb 1980; Wilkins 1980). Others contend that the task is made practicable by focusing the analysis on trends rather than levels (Council of Europe 1982; Archer & Gartner 1984; Bennett & Lynch 1990). The point of departure for the present work is that basing an analysis on trends in time series, rather than on crime levels, makes it possible to conduct comparisons. Isolated annual fluctuations are also excluded from the analysis. The basic assumption made in the comparative analysis of crime trends is that possible shifts in these trends are to be interpreted as representing real changes if the legal and statistical conditions on which the statistics are based may reasonably be excluded as an explanation. At the practical level, however, the difficulty lies in collecting

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3 Important factors assumed to have an effect on the propensity to report crime include: the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the seriousness of the offence, the general attitude towards crime, and whether or not the object of the crime is covered by an insurance policy.

4 The term traditional crime refers primarily to violent and property offences. It might be added that the majority of these offences are offences that for the most part only come to the attention of the police when they are reported by the public. By contrast, many so-called modern offences are instead such as must be ‘discovered’ by the police in the course of their work in order to be recorded.

5 There are a number of exceptions, however. Two examples include serious offences where the persons involved are close to one another, and crimes that take place within groups where levels of criminal involvement are high. For a discussion of results from victim surveys and self-report studies on the propensity to report crime in different countries, see for example Skogan (1984).

6 There are crime types for which cross-national comparisons of levels are in fact possible. Such crimes are those for which alternative data sources are available and/or for which the propensity to report is very high.

7 The term real changes also refers to shifts in the propensity to report crime. The dark figure problem is not quite so difficult to deal with in relation to analyses of trends, however, as it is in relation to comparisons of crime
a sufficient amount of "background information" relating to the international statistical series that are to be included in the analysis. This constitutes one of the reasons for excluding isolated annual fluctuations from the analysis; the risk for making erroneous interpretations is diminished when the focus of the analysis is directed solely at the overall trends. What then are the most important problems that arise in connection with an analysis of trends in crime statistics from different countries? First and foremost, it may be noted that such an analysis includes the dimensions of both time and space. In order to frame the problems in terms of these different dimensions, two constructs have been borrowed from the literature in this area (von Hofer 1991; Westfelt 2001):

(1) *The continuity problem* – relates to difficulties associated with comparing statistical series over time (see the examples presented below).

(2) *The congruity problem* – relates to all the problems associated with comparing statistics across different countries. Simply choosing not to focus on crime levels does not mean that one avoids all the comparability problems associated with comparative analysis. It is important to identify differences in legal, statistical and cultural definitions of crime in order to be able to find comparable offence categories. The objective is naturally to achieve as great a degree of similarity as possible in the content of the categories to be compared (see the examples presented below).

In addition, three additional factors should be mentioned, all of which have a fundamental effect on statistics. These are *statistical conditions*, *legal conditions*, and *real world conditions*. The following figure cross-tabulates these conditions with the two dimensions described above (Westfelt 2001):

*Table 1. Cross-tabulation of methodological problems and conditions affecting crime statistics.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Continuity problem</th>
<th>Congruity problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statistical</td>
<td>Changes to (formal) rules governing the collection and production of statistics as well as the (informal) application of these rules over time.</td>
<td>Differences between countries regarding the (formal) rules governing the collection and production of statistics as well as the (informal) application of these rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conditions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal conditions</td>
<td>(Formal) changes in the formulation of legislation/legal process and (informal) changes to praxis over time.</td>
<td>(Formal) differences between countries regarding legislation and legal process and (informal) differences relating to their application/praxis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

levels. When comparing levels, the proportion of crimes that remain unreported has to be the same across the countries included in the comparison. Trend comparisons, on the other hand, only require that the proportion of unreported offences is more or less constant over time.
Real world conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in the propensity to commit offences, the opportunity structure, likelihood of detection, reporting propensities etc.</th>
<th>Differences between countries regarding the propensity to commit offences, the opportunity structure, likelihood of detection, reporting propensities etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term *statistical conditions* relates to (formal) rules for the collection and production of statistics and the (informal) application of these rules. One example from this area would be changes over time or differences between countries in the rules for how various offences are counted and the way such rules are applied (see the examples presented below). The term *legal conditions* refers to a country’s legislation and the way legal procedures are formulated (formal) and to praxis in these areas (informal). Examples might include the opportunities available to the police to exercise various forms of discretion and police policy in general. The term "discretion" is used to refer to the police’s capacity to choose whether or not an offence should be investigated/recorded; the extent of this discretionary power is in turn dependent on different legal traditions (e.g. Sveri 1988; Kangaspunta 1995; Kommer 1995). Naturally, the way the police prioritise the use of their resources, and their exercise of discretion will affect the statistics. It is only possible to talk about real world conditions once controls have been conducted for these other factors (i.e. A and B are prerequisites for C). Examples of such conditions are the propensity to commit offences, the opportunity structure, control, the likelihood of detection and reporting propensities. Thus these conditions include the factors that are viewed by theories to be the causes of crime (and of the reporting of crime).

In the ideal data set for trend comparisons, all problems associated with dimensions A and B (in the model) would be controlled. In reality, of course, this is impossible. The most difficult factors to control for are probably the differences and changes of an "informal" nature (von Hofer et al. 1991). Differences between countries, and changes over time within the same country, with regard to praxis within the justice system (the police and courts) and the application of rules for the collection and production of statistics may be difficult to measure and therefore also difficult to know very much about.

2.3.2 Alternative statistics; victim surveys, self-report survey, hospital admissions and cause of death data

For a couple of decades now, victim surveys have been conducted in several, but unfortunately in nothing like all, European countries, asking a random sample of the general population about their experiences of criminal victimisation. One obvious advantage with these surveys is that they are independent of the relevant country’s judicial system and official statistics. These surveys have therefore shown themselves to constitute an important complement to the official crime statistics. They are not without problems of their own, of course. The sources of error involved here include the use of small samples, for example, large attrition rates, and under- and over-reporting. Two basic types of victim survey can be distinguished; the one comprises the national surveys whose objective is to follow levels and trends in victimisation in individual countries, the other comprises the international survey whose objective is to compare different countries with one another. This latter project goes
under the name the "International Crime Victimization Survey" (ICVS) and to date, four such surveys have been conducted, in 1988, 1991, 1995 and 1999 (van Dijk et al. 1990; van Dijk & Mayhew 1993; Mayhew & van Dijk 1997; van Kesteren et al. 2000).

The samples employed in the international crime victim surveys are relatively small (approximately 2,000 individuals per country but for several countries the completed response rate is as low as 1,000). The size of the samples drawn for the national victim surveys are generally somewhat larger (the series presented later in this chapter are based on annual interviews conducted with between 4,000 and 12,000 individuals/households). Employing a sample to draw conclusions about an entire population is always associated with some degree of uncertainty, but this level of uncertainty decreases the larger the sample that is used. This means that the findings of the ICVS are less suited to estimating actual levels of victimisation in the various countries involved. Cross national comparisons of victimisation levels are also difficult to make on the basis of the national victim surveys however. Here the problem is primarily related to the fact that the operationalisations of crime differ between the surveys employed in different countries. One example of this is that the series for violent crime measured in Sweden includes muggings whereas in England it relates only to assault (Farrington & Wikström 1993, p. 149). In Finland, the same series is restricted to violence resulting in physical injury (Aromaa 1998).

A further problem with victim surveys is that not all potential respondents can be reached by means of an interview. There is a risk that certain groups, such as those living in poverty and marginalised individuals, will be excluded from the survey. One particular problem associated with attempts to compare levels of victimisation across different countries is that of variations in the proportion of the population with access to a telephone. Another, related problem is that certain of the persons contacted do not wish to be interviewed. In certain of the countries included in the ICVS-surveys, levels of this kind of attrition have been very high (comprising up to 70 per cent of the sample). The average level of attrition for the first three surveys amounted to 43 per cent; in the most recent survey, this figure stood at 36 per cent (van Kesteren et al. 2000, p. 116). When it comes to interpreting survey findings, the essential question is that of whether the attrition may be regarded as more or less random or whether it is selective. If different categories of people are counted among the attrition to a varying extent in the countries studied, comparability will be seriously affected.

In the majority of victim surveys, data on criminal victimisation are presented using two different measures; prevalence and incidence. The term incidence relates to the number of incidents/offences that the respondents have been exposed to, whilst prevalence data relate to the proportion of persons with experience of criminal victimisation. In some of the empirical examples presented below, both these measures have been used. Prevalence data may be regarded as being somewhat more reliable, for which reason these have been used as the principal measure. The reason prevalence data are somewhat more reliable is that an additional degree of uncertainty is introduced when the number of incidents/offences is estimated. One problem relates to the risk for over-estimation as a result of double-reporting: if a number of individuals are victims of the same event, then this event is counted several times. Another problem is that the risk for memory lapses may be assumed to be greater when the number of incidents is to be reported.

In addition there are problems associated with the "correctness" of respondents’ answers. "Incorrect" answers may result from several different causes. Amongst others these include misunderstood questions, memory difficulties, untruths and an unwillingness to answer
questions deemed to be sensitive. A certain level of over-reporting may also result from so-called telescoping effects. This refers to the phenomenon of respondents reporting incidents that occurred prior to the recall period covered by the survey (e.g. “the previous year”). This might be caused by a desire to please the interviewer or more generally to give socially desirable answers. Under-reporting may result for the same reasons, but it is more often caused by an unwillingness to answer questions of a sensitive nature such as may relate to sexual assaults and violence perpetrated within close relationships (Walby & Myhill 2001).

Self-report surveys also constitute a good alternative means of measuring the extent of and trends in crime. These are associated with similar advantages and problems as the victim surveys. An additional limitation, however, is that studies of self-reported offending most often focus on crimes committed by juveniles. Unfortunately, there is at present only one study that has attempted to describe the extent of various criminal behaviours among young people in different countries, namely the International Self-Report Study (ISRD) (Junger-Tas et al. 1994). To date, a second wave of the ISRD has not yet been conducted, which makes comparisons over time impossible. On the other hand, a number of Western European countries have conducted national self-report surveys that do allow for comparisons over time. Both Finland and Sweden have conducted four national surveys covering the period 1995 to 2001 (Kivivouri 2002; Ring 2003). In Sweden there are also a couple of more local studies that have examined trends over time, of which the most interesting compares offences committed by young persons in 1971 and 1996 respectively (Ward 1998; Chinapah 2000). In Denmark, one local self-report study has been conducted in three waves in 1979, 1989 and 1999 (Balvig 2000). In Holland, a national self-report study has been conducted biannually since 1988 (Estrada 1999).

Once source that is not used very often, but which can often provide valuable information on violent offences is hospital admissions data. Several studies have described violent crime on the basis of cross-sectional surveys of patients admitted to accident and emergency departments as a result of violent injuries (e.g. Cherpitel 1993; Shepherd et al. 1993; Brink 1999). One problem is that data relating to patients with violent injuries are often geographically restricted and another that longer time series are more or less non-existent. One of the advantages associated with this source of data, on the other hand, is that they show a good deal of the more serious violence that is never reported to the police or recorded by victim surveys. There is thus a clear potential here for the creation of interesting and comparable series describing violent injuries in different countries. This chapter presents a series of data on violent injuries from Sweden.

Statistics relating to fatal violence are often seen as the most reliable indicator of the trends in violent offending since few cases will be unreported. Trends in fatal violence can therefore be used as verification for trends in types of violent offences characterised by a somewhat larger dark figure (Doob & Sprott 1998; von Hofer 2000). With regard to fatal violence, it is essential to differentiate between cases where a homicide has been attempted and those that have actually resulted in death. These categories are combined far too often. The point of using fatal violence as an indicator is its robustness in relation to changes in the way society reacts to violence. Attempted murder is an arbitrary categorisation sensitive to changes in the general perspective on violent acts. The homicide trends witnessed by Holland’s police statistics constitute an example of this. Data relating to longer term trends are only available with the offence of attempted homicide included. For those years where it is possible to separate attempted homicides (1983-1994) it can be seen that the series including attempted homicides increased by a factor of 70 per cent whereas the series with attempted offences
excluded increased only by 15 per cent. Thus series including attempted homicides should not be compared with statistical series where these attempt offences are not included.

The discussion above has shown that analyses of international crime trends based on a single statistical indicator are often fairly unreliable. In short, any attempt to produce an ideal description of international trends should be based not only on official crime statistics, but should also utilise other statistics, such as victims studies and cause of death statistics, that are less affected by changes in the criminal justice system or in the methods used to produce the official statistics. Further, the available data are most suited to describing and comparing crime trends across different countries and not crime levels. Where possible, a presentation of the domestic debate regarding crime trends and the reliability of the data contributes to the analysis by making it possible to judge the relative worth of the various indicators. Validity should thus be seen as less satisfactory for those countries where descriptions are based on the analysis of a very few indicators such as ‘persons convicted of all offence types’. In those cases where the description is based on a number of sources including alternative statistics, and where a discussion of crime trends is included, validity is much improved.

3. International crime trends in practice: exemplifying three different approaches to the study of post-war crime trends in Western Europe

It is well established that the number of criminal offences registered in the official crime statistics was much larger in the year 2000 than it was in 1950. Post-war criminological research into crime trends has accordingly been dominated by descriptions of an ever-increasing population of offenders (see for example Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Killias 1995; Smith 1995). In more recent times, however, an alternative description, highlighting a levelling off in this trend during the 1980s has gained currency in some circles (von Hofer 1985; Kyvsgaard 1991; Joutsen 1996; van Dijk 1997; Estrada 1999; Westfelt 2001). Two models can be formulated to describe these trends.

1. The linear upward trend (the usual description).
2. An initial increase followed by a levelling-off (the alternative description).

Since these models differ only in respect of the second half of the period under study, the following analysis focuses chiefly on those trends that have characterised the last three decades. The question to be answered is which of these two models best describes the trends in crime in Western Europe.

This section employs three different methods for conducting international comparisons of crime trends in order to illustrate the methodological issues discussed in the first section of this chapter. The presentation begins by presenting the overall crime trend in Western Europe during the post-war period. The sample of countries has been chosen on the basis of a "most similar" approach and the analysis is based on crime statistics collected by the authors themselves which are then compared with alternative data from international and national victim surveys. The second sub-section relates to trends in juvenile crime in Europe. Here too, the study is based on a "most similar approach" and employs a number of different sources of data. The difference here, however, is that the analysis is based on a meta-study. The final
sub-section employs several different sources of data to examine European trends in violent crime.

3.1 The overall crime trend

Figure 1 presents the trend in offences reported to the police in nine Western European countries. At the general level, the trend appears to be similar across these different countries. Note that it is not appropriate to analyse level differences in this context as a result of differences in legal and statistical conditions between the countries examined. None of the countries presents a stable or decreasing trend during the post-war period. All countries have recorded increases in crime. On the whole these trends are dominated by theft and criminal damage. Trends in two of the countries have periodically differed somewhat from the remainder. In Austria, the number of reported offences increased at a somewhat slower rate than in the other countries up until the end of the 1970s (cf. Gurr 1978; Hanak & Pilgram 1991:93). England & Wales witnessed a substantial increase in the number of reported offences between 1989 and 1992 (Joutsen 1996; see also Tham 1998). The similarly dramatic decrease over the following period might be interpreted as constituting a case of "regression towards the mean", i.e. that the series is retreating from extreme levels towards more "normal" values. For the most part, however, there are substantial similarities across the countries and the pattern during the 1990s indicates that the crime trend in Western Europe appears to have shifted direction. The figure shows that none of the series lies at a higher level at the end of the 1990s by comparison with the beginning of this decade. In the majority of the non-Nordic countries, the slow-down can be distinguished as early as the second half of the 1980s, whereas this levelling off does not begin until the 1990s in the series from the Nordic countries. These results correspond with the second of the two models (Model 2) described above.

Figure 1 about here

Data from national and international victim surveys are now employed to verify the trends identified on the basis of the official crime statistics. In this context, the objective of carrying out a control of this kind is naturally to come closer to answering the question of the extent to which the levelling off witnessed in the statistics may be the result of a real change in crime trends. If victimological data indicate an increase during the period in question, then this would suggest a reduction in the propensity to report crime rather than a stabilisation in crime levels. The results from the ICVS are not very well suited to a comparison of trends over time. Amongst other things, this is because only three European countries - England & Wales, Holland and Finland – have participated in all four waves of the survey (1988, 1991, 1995, 1999). Further, there are a number of differences between the four waves that make comparisons across them somewhat uncertain. If incidence data from the three countries that have participated in all four waves are examined, a combined crime indicator shows crime to

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8 In total, 22 countries have participated in the four surveys. The European countries that have participated on at least one occasion comprise Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, England & Wales, Italy, Holland, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, West Germany and Austria. The offence types covered by the surveys are car theft, theft from a car, vandalism of a car, motorcycle theft, bicycle theft, breaking and entering, attempted breaking and entering, robbery, theft from the person, sex offences and assault/threatening behaviour (van Kesteren, Mayhew & Nieuwbeerta 2000).
have increased between 1988 and 1991. Between 1991 and 1999, on the other hand, crime levels appear to have either decreased or to have remained at a more or less stable level (van Kesteren, Mayhew & Nieuwbeerta 2000, p.49). In combination, these data confirm the levelling off indicated by the official crime statistics.

A large number of countries have conducted *national* surveys which have included questions on experiences of criminal victimisation. In Europe, however, many countries have not carried out such national surveys over a long period of time. Figure 2 presents crime trends from five European countries as recorded by victim data and official crime statistics. In general, the picture that emerges indicates that the population’s reports of exposure to theft/vandalism mirror rather well the trend in levels of crime reported to the police.

![Figure 2 about here](image)

In *Sweden*, both offences reported to the police and the levels of criminal victimisation reported by the general population increased up until 1990, and stabilised thereafter. Roughly speaking, victim statistics from *Denmark* remain at a consistent level throughout the period whereas police statistics increase up until the end of the 1980s and then begin to level off. The victim data from *Finland* indicate a reduction in levels of exposure to theft during the 1990s. In *England* the data indicate that the 1990s first witnessed something of an increase in levels of victimisation but that these levels then decreased at the end of the period, such that the proportion experiencing victimisation at the end of the period is somewhat smaller than that seen at the beginning of the decade. Thus there is a correspondence between the victim data and the police statistics, but the fluctuations are greater in the police statistics than they are in the victimological data. In *Holland*, the situation is relatively stable during the 1990s in relation to theft offences. It should be noted, however, that the victim data collected in Holland differ somewhat from those collected in the other countries; in Holland these are incidence rather than prevalence data. In Holland, the number of theft offences reported to the police starts to level off as early as the mid 1980s, and the victimological data mirror this trend rather well.

### 3.2 Juvenile crime trends

In order to describe general trends in juvenile crime, we will be using a meta-study based on national surveys from countries with a similar social structure (Estrada 1999). This study covers the following countries: Austria, Denmark, England & Wales (hereafter referred to simply as ‘England’), Finland, (West) Germany, Holland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and Switzerland. The availability of data played an important part in the choice of countries to be included. A search for relevant literature was carried out in a number of databases and there were countries, such as those in southern Europe, for which insufficient material could be found. In addition contact was established with researchers and research centres in most of

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9 The data for 1997 are the same as those reported to the ICVS.

10 The series relating to all offences has been employed for England. This ought in fact to be comprised of theft offences to a large extent, however, and should therefore reflect trends in these offences relatively well.

11 The description of Germany refers exclusively to that part of the country which was known as West Germany up until 1989.

12 The following electronic databases were used: *Sociofile*, *Criminal Justice Abstracts* and *National Criminal Justice Reference Service*. These databases were trawled using the following keywords: “((Youth or Juvenile) and (trends or crime trends) or crime rates)),” for the years 1980-1996.
the countries covered by the study. Data attained in this way will be referred to below as PI (personal information). Table 2 presents the indicators employed in the studies on which the meta-analysis is based.

**Table 2. Indicators included in the meta-analysis, by country.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Holland</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
<th>Austria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convicted persons</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All crime types</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimes of violence</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juveniles and adults</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suspects</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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**Explanation of the row headings:**

- **Convicted persons:** statistics covering convicted persons.
- **All crime types:** statistics covering juvenile crime trends for all types of crime.
- **Crimes of violence:** statistics covering trends in crimes of violence committed by juveniles.
- **Juveniles and adults:** separate presentation of crime trends for juveniles and adults.
- **Suspected persons:** statistics covering persons suspected of having committed offences.
- **Victim surveys:** victim surveys that allow for comparisons over time.
- **Theft:** statistics covering trends in thefts committed by juveniles.
- **Domestic debate:** a documented domestic debate regarding juvenile crime trends.
- **Self-report studies:** self-report studies that allow for comparisons over time.
- **Detection rate:** a control for possible changes in the detection rate.

In brief (for a more extensive presentation see Estrada 1999), the results of the meta-study indicate that in several Western European countries - Denmark, Holland, Norway, Scotland and Sweden – juvenile crime trends follow a sharp upward trend during the first decades after the Second World War. This trend is then broken between the mid 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and thereafter levels off. The pattern is similar in Austria and Switzerland, but here the data is considered weaker. In Finland, England and Germany the upward trend seems to

*Abstracts on Criminology and Penology* was available only in book-format and here the search was limited to the sections Juvenile Delinquency, Comparative Analysis, Crime Measurement, Crime Pattern and Time Series Research for the years 1980-1996.
have continued into the 1990s. Thus in the majority of countries at least the post-war period does not appear to be characterised by an ever expanding population of young criminals; instead the data are more consistent with Model 2 as presented above.

One central question is the extent to which the trends described are real, or simply the result of amongst other things procedural changes in the criminal justice system or variations in reporting behaviour (see above). The most obvious answer is of course that both alternatives are true to a varying extent. In most of the countries studied here for example statistics concerning convicted juveniles indicate a clear reduction over the last twenty years or so. Those indicators which lie ‘closer’ to the crime event however, and which are thus less sensitive to changes within the criminal justice system (such as statistics relating to suspects), suggest that the reductions are not real but are rather the result of "system effects" (see for example von Hofer 1985; Farrington 1992; Junger-Tas 1992; Clausen 1996; Walter 1996; Estrada 1999). It is nonetheless important to remember that for most countries these sources do not indicate that the number of juvenile offenders has continued to increase at an undiminished rate during this period. This interpretation is reinforced by alternative statistics. In those countries where self-report studies are available over time they suggest a stable level of juvenile offenders (Junger-Tas 1992 & PI; Balvig 2000; Kivivouri 2002; Ring 2003). In addition, as was seen above, the available victim surveys indicate that the underlying crime trends have probably levelled off over the past fifteen years. The data from several countries suggest that the rise in crime that remains to be explained once changes in reporting behaviour have been taken into account, ought really to be ascribed to adults (aged 20+) rather than juveniles. Crime trends for adult offenders over the last twenty years are essentially different from those for juveniles in Denmark, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland (Junger-Tas 1992; Kyvsgaard 1993; Clausen 1996; Niggli & Pfister 1997; Estrada 1999).

3.3 Trends in violent crime

Violent offending stands out historically as one of, if not the most prominent of the social problems associated with the field of deviant behaviour (Pearson 1983). As we have entered the new millennium, academics, the media, politicians and the public seem for once to be in agreement that the number of people, and particularly youths, committing violent offences is increasing rapidly in Europe (see for example Home Office 1997; Pfeiffer 1998; Sunday Times 1998). Current research into trends in violence in Europe is often based on the various countries’ official crime statistics. The reasons for this are reasonably straightforward in that data of this kind are both easily available, and in many countries they constitute the only form of information available. As we have discussed already, however, interpretations of crime statistics are far from self-evident. Since acts of violence may be perceived as a more subjective type of crime than thefts, the recording of acts of violence is also more sensitive to changes in attitudes towards control. In Sweden, for example, the number of youths convicted of assault increased substantially during the 20th century. This increase is particularly marked from the mid 1980s, from which point the number of convictions tripled up to the end of the 1990s (Estrada 2001). But does this mean that the level of violence in Sweden has actually increased in such a dramatic fashion? The same statistics show that hardly any youths were

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13 At the 51st Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology (Toronto 1999) a seminar was arranged (session 378) for a number of prominent criminologists to discuss the steep increase in violent juvenile offending in Europe.
convicted of assault during the 1920s. This does not mean that the young people of the time
did not commit acts of violence, of course, but rather it suggests that during the 20th century
the means of controlling violence have shifted from the informal to the formal arena (Pearson

On the whole, crime trends are dominated by theft and criminal damage. Since violent crime
makes up a very small part of the sum total of offences, changes in the level of violent
offending are easily lost in descriptions of underlying crime trends. In Figure 3 we can see
that the levelling off witnessed in the overall crime trend is absent from the trend in crimes of
violence reported to the police. In the matter of assault offences, the trend is instead
characterised by clear increases from around the mid-1960s. As was pointed out earlier, the
crime levels in the different countries cannot be interpreted at all. Given this backdrop, it
makes sense to look to alternative indicators that may be considered less sensitive to changes
in the propensity to report such offences in order to see whether these data may confirm the
increasing trend visible in the crime statistics. The presentation below comprises a description
of trends in violence based on alternative data sources, and a special examination of the trends
in juvenile violence.

**Figure 3 about here.**

3.3.1 Alternative measures of trends in violence

Figure 4 presents trends in violent crime from six European countries according to
victimological data and official crime statistics. The overall picture that emerges is one where
the level of violent victimisation reported by the general population is relatively stable over
recent decades whilst levels of violent crime reported to the police increase substantially. In
England, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, police statistics on violent offending indicate a
dramatic and more or less continuous increase since 1970. At the same time, victim surveys
from the different countries present a stable level of victimisation in the population. In
Finland and Holland, the main pattern is the same, but here the victim surveys indicate a
reduction in levels of victimisation. Thus the different series for violent crime present clearly
dissimilar trends.

**Figure 4 about here.**

Homicide (murder and manslaughter) constitutes one of the few crime categories where the
majority of experts are agreed that not only trends over time but also crime levels may be
compared across different countries – particularly when data is drawn from internationally
standardised cause of death statistics. The reason for this is that the dark figure for homicides
is assumed to be relatively small. There are also substantial similarities in homicide trends
across the different countries examined. For the most part, the post-war period is
characterised by increases in Sweden, the remaining Nordic countries and the non-Nordic
countries (Figure 5).14 This increase stands in sharp contrast to the trend witnessed from the

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14 In order to avoid presenting mean-based series which may be misleading as a result of isolated series lying at
an appreciably higher level than the others and thus assuming a disproportionately large weight, the series were
centred prior to making mean-based series for “Europe” and “Scandinavia”. This centring process took the
Swedish series as its point of departure, in accordance with the formula:
second half of the 19th century up until the outbreak of the Second World War. International comparisons have shown that levels of homicide fell substantially during this period in the majority of European countries (Eisner 1994). During the 1980s, however, the trends underwent something of a stabilisation, particularly by comparison with the statistics relating to assault offences reported to the police. It should be born in mind that incidents of homicide are very rare, which makes interpretations of trends very difficult over the short term (Ross 1974; Lenke 1990; Westfelt 1998).

Figure 5 about here.

3.3.2 Juvenile violence; The Swedish case in a European context

In order to further illustrate the problems associated with drawing conclusions about trends in violent crime on the basis of official crime statistics, this presentation now moves on to a more detailed examination of a single case – namely trends in juvenile violence in Sweden. What makes the Swedish case interesting for an international audience is the fact that Swedish statistics follow the same sharply increasing trend as those found in the crime statistics of other Western European countries (Pfeiffer 1998; Rutter et al 1998; Estrada 1999). Questioning the validity of Swedish crime statistics as an indicator of crime trends thus implies a challenge to interpretations based on official statistics in other countries. It is also our contention that a reasonable interpretation of trends in violence is only possible once alternative indicators have been studied. To the extent that corresponding data are unavailable in other countries, the Swedish material becomes of even greater interest.

A examination of the Swedish victim surveys suggests that the number of juveniles being exposed to violence increased somewhat from the mid 1980s to then slow down again during the 1990s, once again settling at the level witnessed during the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. Thus the statistics from victim surveys do not suggest a linear trend in juvenile victimisation (Nilsson & Estrada 2003). Since 1972, self-report surveys on drug use have been carried out in Stockholm among all students in year nine (i.e. 15 year olds). Since 1987, these surveys have also included questions on the students’ experiences of violence. These surveys indicate that schoolchildren in Stockholm report neither that more of them have been assaulted, nor that more are carrying out assaults, nor even that they have witnessed more acts of violence during the years 1987-1998 (Estrada 2001). Data are available for the years 1995-2001 from a nationally representative self-report study of crime among schoolchildren. These surveys show stable response rates in relation to levels of self-reported violent crime (Ring 2003). A reasonable summary of the results of victim and self-report surveys is thus that they do not show a continual increase but rather that violent acts by youths have remained at a more or less stable level since the 1970s.
Since the end of the 1960s, Sweden has maintained a register of patients admitted to public hospitals. This patient register contains amongst other things details of the number of persons admitted as a result of assaults. Figure 6 below presents the number of hospital admissions for different age groups. There has been no general increase in the numbers admitted for hospital care as a result of violence. The clear rise in numbers seen during the period 1968-1973 is probably most correctly interpreted as indicating the length of the start-up phase for the reporting system. It is interesting to note that the trend is reminiscent of that indicated by the nationwide victim surveys (see Figure 4 above). The higher levels in the 1990s correspond well with those presented during the second half of the 1970s. Here too, the mid 1980s stand out as a low-point. A reasonable summary is that the number of hospital admissions resulting from violence has remained at a more or less stable level since 1973 for persons aged 10-25 years.

Figure 6 about here

Since the 1970s, violence resulting in death has not increased in terms of either the number of youths who are perpetrators or the number who are victims (Estrada 2001). This suggests at the very least that any increases in juvenile violence that may have occurred have not affected the levels of the most serious forms of violence. Viewed together, these alternative indicators present a completely different picture from that given by the crime statistics. To be blunt, there is very little to indicate a substantial increase in Sweden either in the number of youths falling victim to violence, or in the number perpetrating acts of violence on others, apart from crime statistics which are sensitive to changes in the response to violence.

Comparative research has presented Sweden as a country with similar trends in juvenile violence to those of the rest of Europe (Pfeiffer 1998; Rutter et al 1998). What is interesting, of course, is whether this might indeed be the case, but in a rather different way from that described in the literature. This is an empirical question that will not be answered in full here. What can be said, however, is that the example provided by Sweden ought to be interpreted as indicating that analyses of trends in violent offending should not be based exclusively on crime statistics. To the extent that different indicators suggest differences in trends, however, priority ought to be given to those least affected by changes in reporting propensities. As was seen in the presentation of Swedish trends, such indicators comprise various forms of questionnaire survey, hospital data and statistics relating to fatal violence.

Viewed in this way, several of the countries whose data on juvenile violence have been interpreted as indicating an increase, present a somewhat less clear picture. In the analyses presented by Pfeiffer (1998) and Rutter et al. (1998, p.73) increases in juvenile violence are referred to almost exclusively on the basis of official crime statistics from different countries. This is a consequence of the fact that most European countries lack reliable alternative indicators. In those countries where there are alternative statistics, however, these are more in line with the picture that emerged from the analysis of Swedish data just presented above. Thus, as has been shown, victim surveys from several countries show that the population’s experience of violence has not increased over recent years. In addition, there are further alternative indicators from Denmark which show a stable trend as compared with that indicated by police data. Brink et al. (1997) present an analysis of hospital data for the years 1982, 1988 and 1994. Their results show that juvenile violence has neither increased nor

15 Hospital admission statistics are presented in such a way that the same person being admitted several times during the same year will be counted once for each admission. The figures for 1997 should be regarded with caution since there has been both a change in the classification system and a drop in the quality of reporting.
become more serious. What has increased, however, is the reporting propensity among youths (aged 15-19). Fatal violence presents no increase either (Kyvsgaard 2000). Danish self-report studies among 14-15 year old students indicate less violence in 1999 than in 1979 (Kyvsgaard 1992; Balvig 2000). Finland and Norway show the same pattern as Sweden and Denmark, i.e. dramatic increases in juvenile violence as reflected in crime statistics, but a more or less stable level as recorded in victim surveys (Estrada 1999; Falck 2000) and self report studies (Kivivouri 2002).

Another of the few European countries where alternative indicators of crime trends are available is Holland. Here too, the substantial increase in levels of non-serious violence which are indicated by Dutch crime statistics are not matched by increases in either fatal violence or in the proportion of victim survey respondents saying that they have been threatened (Franke 1994; Junger-Tas 1996; Wittebrood & Junger 2002). The Dutch victim surveys go so far as to indicate that the number of violent crime experiences has diminished during the 1990s for the population aged 15-24 years (personal communication, Central Bureau of Statistics Netherlands). In Holland, hospital data are also available relating to the number of patients admitted for violent injuries. These data are very reminiscent of those from Sweden, indicating a substantial level of stability over recent decades (Wittebrood & Junger 2002).

The review presented above thus shows that a number of objections may be raised in relation to the picture of a pan-European increase in violent crime as described by the media, politicians and certain academics. One example of this relates to Pfeiffer’s contention that "when longitudinal data are available from victim surveys, they support the inference from police and judicial data that violent crime among young people has been rising rapidly" (1998, p.298, emphasis added), a conclusion that appears quite simply to be mistaken given the data presented in this chapter. Integrating the interpretations of data drawn from alternative sources and crime statistics instead leads to the following hypothesis regarding violence in Europe. Trends in crime do not constitute the primary explanation for the rapid rise in the number of people, and particularly youths, registered by the criminal justice system during the 1990s. This rise is rather the result of a marked shift in the way society reacts to people’s actions. We hypothesise that over recent years, the attention focused on violent acts has increased. This increase in attention has occurred in parallel with an ideological shift, from the treatment ideology to a neo-classicist focus on just deserts, which has affected the politics of social control (Tham 1995; Garland 2001). Together, these tendencies have lead to an increasing propensity to report acts of violence, which in turn has led to a situation exhibiting all the classic characteristics of a deviancy amplification spiral (Hall et al. 1978; von Hofer 2000; Estrada 2001).16

4. Conclusion

This chapter has raised a number of the fundamental questions that have to be dealt with in the context of comparative crime studies. In part these relate to the choice of countries for inclusion in the study, in part to the choice of data and methods of data collection. The

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16 Estrada (2001) presents two studies testing this hypothesis. The first focuses on the media attention surrounding the issue of juvenile crime during the period 1950-1994. The second looks at the concrete effects that changes in reporting propensities may have on the registration of juvenile violence in official crime statistics.
presentation has focused particular attention on the question of the suitability of official crime statistics for analyses of crime trends in different countries. The advantages and disadvantages of different data sources have been discussed. As a result of the shortcomings identified in the various available sources, we draw the conclusion that analyses should not be based on single statistical indicators. A further conclusion drawn in this chapter is that given the data available, it is difficult to make comparisons of crime levels across different countries. One possible way of making such comparisons is instead to focus on trends in crime.

The empirical sections of the chapter illustrate a number of the methodological questions discussed in the introduction. In concrete terms, we have chosen to proceed from the question of how best to describe post-war crime trends in Western Europe. Has the period witnessed a linear and continuous increase in crime? Or is it possible to discern a levelling off in this increase? And if so, is this levelling off a general phenomenon, or is it restricted to one or just a few countries or offence types for example? In order to answer these questions, the chapter presents a large amount of data from a variety of different sources in ten or so countries. It is clear that crime levels increased during the post-war period across Western Europe. It is just as clear, however, that this increase has not continued in a linear fashion throughout the entire period. In all of the countries included in the analysis, there is a clear levelling off around the end of the 1980s. Levels of juvenile crime also underwent an increase during the post-war period, followed by a levelling off in this trend. One interesting factor is that the increase in the number of juvenile offenders appears to slow down at the beginning rather than the end of the 1980s. This means that it might be possible to look at the trend in juvenile crime as one possible explanation for the levelling off in the overall crime trend. Further research is required here, however. In addition, the chapter has focused particular attention on an examination of trends in violent crime, which appear on the basis of official crime statistics to have undergone a dramatic increase over recent decades. Using alternative sources of data, such as victim and self-report surveys, hospital data and cause of death statistics, we show that trends in violent crime have also levelled off over recent years. We would contend that the three empirical studies presented in this chapter in themselves show that comparative studies are a practical possibility. What is also clear, however, is that comparative analyses require detailed knowledge of the quality and comparability of the data employed, as well as a healthy scepticism in relation to conclusions drawn on the basis of isolated indicators of crime.

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Figures

FIGURE 1. Total number of registered offences in nine European countries, 1950-1997, per 100 000 of population.
FIGURE 2. A - E. Proportion of victims (per cent) and the number of reported offences in Sweden (A), Denmark (B), Finland (C), England (D) and Holland (E).

A. Proportion (per cent) reporting theft/vandalism related victimisation and number of reported theft offences in Sweden, 1970-1998.

B. Proportion (per cent) reporting theft related victimisation and number of reported theft offences in Denmark, 1970-1997.

C. Proportion (per cent) reporting theft related victimisation and number of reported theft offences in Finland, 1970-1997.


E. Number of theft incidents declared in victim surveys and number of theft offences reported to the police in Holland, 1970-1997.
FIGURE 4. A–F. Proportion (per cent) victimised by violence and number of reported assault offences in Sweden (A), Norway (B), Denmark (C), Finland (D), England (E) and Holland (F), 1970-1998.

A. Proportion (per cent) reporting exposure to violent victimisation and number of reported assault offences in Sweden, 1970-1998.

B. Proportion (per cent) reporting exposure to threatening behaviour/violent victimisation and number of reported assault offences in Norway, 1970-1997.

C. Proportion (per cent) reporting exposure to threatening behaviour/violent victimisation and number of reported assault offences in Denmark, 1970-1997.

D. Proportion (per cent) reporting exposure to violent victimisation and number of reported assault offences in Finland, 1970-1997.

E. Proportion (per cent) reporting exposure to violent victimisation and number of reported assault offences in England, 1970-1997.

F. Number of violent incidents declared in victim surveys and number of assault offences reported to the police in Holland, 1970-1997.
FIGURE 5. Homicides in Sweden, the rest of Scandinavia and the remainder of Europe, 1955-1995. Mean value, per 100 000 of population.