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crime in our cities —
a comparative report

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Background Note

Changes in recent years in the method and extent of crime reporting have resulted in many differing interpretations of the severity of the crime problem in New South Wales. The technical difficulty of relating present to past figures has not deterred some commentators from concluding that the crime rate is increasing at an enormous pace. On the other hand, others have been inclined to view the apparent increase as reflecting nothing more than the more efficient reporting of crime.

While there is no single correct way of interpreting the available information, the layman requires some help in grasping the overall significance of the crime statistics placed before him by various state agencies.

One kind of technical assistance which might be provided is to show crime figures against a background of key demographic trends. The Bureau of Crime Statistics plans to do this in its first comprehensive report on offence and court statistics for New South Wales to be published in the first half of 1973.

For the moment, it may be helpful if local crime figures were to be compared with rates in other urban industrial societies. The most accessible official statistics with which to make these comparisons, are those provided by the American and Canadian authorities. Other comparisons will be made as data becomes available.

Needless to say, the acceptability or otherwise of existing crime rates is a community issue which must be resolved on a much wider basis than statistical information. This report attempts nothing more ambitious than a comparison of crime rates in various cities but invites further discussion of priorities in dealing with the relative levels of crime that are disclosed.

Overseas Studies of Rural/Urban Crime

Overseas research has generally indicated that crime rates are higher in cities than in rural areas. For example, the American UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS, employing seven crime classifications (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny of \$50 and over and motor vehicle theft), indicate that crime rates are generally higher in urban areas.

Table I shows the rate of occurrence of each of the seven index crimes during 1971. The cities had higher rates for all major crimes except murder and rape:

Table I

Comparison of American Rural/Urban Crime Rates (1971) *

	Rate per 10,000 inhabitants						
	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Car Theft
Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area+	0.9	2.4	25.5	20.1	138.2	107.4	60.0
Other cities	0.5	0.9	3.4	14.4	74.5	77.9	17.4
Rural	0.7	1.1	1.5	10.1	48.5	34.4	6.9

*Adapted from UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS, 1971.

+Standard metropolitan statistical area (consisting of at least one core city of at least 50,000 inhabitants and having metropolitan characteristics).

When the rates for larger cities are compared with those for rural areas, the biggest differences occur with robbery, car theft, larceny, and burglary.*

Much the same pattern is found when smaller cities are compared with larger urban centres. Because of the current interest in decentralisation, a detailed analysis of cities of varying size is presented in the accompanying table.

Generally speaking, for all crimes the rates rise consistently with increase in size of city. The effect of population can be seen in the ratio of crime rates for cities of over 250,000 residents to the rates of cities with less than 10,000 residents. Robbery has the highest ratio followed by car theft, rape, homicide, assault and burglary.

Table II

1971 Crimes known to US Police in Cities of different size

	Rate per 10,000 inhabitants						
	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Car Theft
Over 250,000	1.9	4.4	63.3	35.1	202.6	124.1	105.9
100,000-250,000	1.1	2.7	22.6	23.9	178.9	135.0	73.9
50,000-100,000	0.6	1.7	12.6	15.1	124.3	118.0	49.9
25,000-50,000	0.5	1.2	9.5	13.1	104.2	111.7	35.7
10,000-25,000	0.4	0.9	5.1	12.3	88.0	92.4	25.1
Under 10,000	0.4	0.8	3.1	12.8	72.2	76.3	17.3

*The F.B.I. figures indicate that there is no direct relationship between the number of car thefts and the number of car registrations.

While American cities clearly show higher crime rates than rural areas, the statistics need to be interpreted with caution. It is probable that rural crime is less fully reported. There is a greater likelihood in rural than in urban areas that offences may be handled without resort to official action. The city also provides more opportunities for crime and provides greater anonymity for those whose behaviour violates the declared norms of the society. The rural resident is subjected to closer observation by persons who identify him as a specific individual. This form of 'primary' social control is recognised by sociologists as being especially effective in encouraging conformity to community standards.

Despite the observed differences in rural-urban crime rates, our knowledge of this subject is still far from complete. As Horton and Leslie have indicated, there is no evidence which shows conclusively that country-reared persons are less criminal than their city-reared compatriots. However, questions of origin aside, the fact remains that more crime occurs in the more densely populated areas.*

Does the same pattern exist in the state of New South Wales? The present report explores this issue with the help of 1971 Police Department crime statistics.

*Horton, P.B., Leslie, G.R., THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS, (New York: Appleton - Century - Crofts, 1965). P.125.

The Data

The New South Wales Police Department processes crime statistics on the basis of information contained in 'Incident Reports' which are compiled at the time an offence is detected or reported. With Police cooperation these figures have been recast within a framework which the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research hopes to use in forthcoming reports.

It is possible to use some of the 1971 offence data to calculate rates for different types of crime in urban and rural areas of the state. This has been achieved by matching Police districts with census units of known population size. The numbers of offences of different kinds can then be expressed as a rate per 10,000 population.

The 'urban' crime rates have been calculated on the basis of offences occurring within the three metropolitan areas of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong.* The 'rural' rates reflect offences occurring throughout the remainder of the state. The results of these comparisons are presented in Part I of the report.**

*The population estimates for 1971 were as follows:

Police Districts	Males	Females	Total
Sydney	1,411,533	1,430,752	2,842,285
Newcastle	130,933	131,571	262,504
Wollongong	97,706	91,251	188,957
Rest of state	661,938	633,872	1,295,810

Comparability of definitions is less of a problem with the local figures than it is when we attempt to relate the New South Wales rates to those occurring overseas. Nevertheless, it is possible to make at least rough comparisons with six of the seven index crimes reported by the F.B.I. and five major categories of crime reported by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in Canada. (It is not possible to match the American category 'larceny of \$50 and over' and the Canadian categories of larceny and assault). Our biggest problem is that we have no way of equating the extent to which official figures under-report the 'true' level of crime in the different countries. However, this is less of a problem with some categories of crime (for example, homicide and car theft), than it is with others like rape and robbery.

**Available figures indicate that a large proportion of our crime is committed by young men aged 15 - 24 years. The 1966 census indicates the proportion of 15 - 24 year old males in the population of all four locations does not differ. The proportions are:

Sydney	17.2%
Newcastle	16.1%
Wollongong	16.1%
Rest of state	16.1%

PART I

Rural-Urban Crime Patterns in New South Wales (1971)

Offences Against the Person

The available data permits us to consider a range of offences against the person, including murder and associated offences, manslaughter, abduction and kidnapping, robbery and demanding money with menaces, major and minor assault, and abortion. When these offences were considered as a whole, the urban areas were found to have a rate of 10.9 per 10,000 and the rural area a rate of 3.8 per 10,000. This meant that the rate in the cities was 2.8 times higher than it was in the country.

Murder

Under the general heading of murder offences it has been possible to compare rural-urban rates for a number of associated offences including 'attempts', conspiring and being an accessory to murder, and shoot with intent to murder.

American studies have shown that murder is an exception to the general rule that crime rates are higher in cities than in rural areas. The offence statistics for New South Wales show that a similar pattern prevails in this state; the murder rate for the three urban centres was .31 per 10,000 compared with the rate of .37 per 10,000 in the country.

Robbery

Robbery and demanding money with menaces occurred eight times more frequently in the urban areas. The combined rate for Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong was 4.3 per 10,000 compared with 0.5 per 10,000 in the rest of the state.

Sexual Offences

Compared with other categories of crime, the rate of sexual offences in the cities and the country was quite similar. Homosexual offences occurred more frequently in the cities but a number of heterosexual offences including carnal knowledge, indecent assault, and incest, were slightly more common in the country area:

Type of Offence	Rate per 10,000 population	
	Urban areas	Rural areas
Rape	0.5	0.4
Other heterosexual offences	3.5	4.4
Homosexual offences	0.6	0.5
Total sex offences	4.7	5.3

Property Offences

As a general type of offence, crimes against property were far more frequent in the urban areas.

Housebreaking

The police data enables us to consider a range of offences which involve violation of premises but not violence to the person. This group of offences includes breaking and entering, attempts to break and enter and the crime of having housebreaking implements in possession.

When all these offences are considered, we find the urban rate is 2.7 times greater than the rate in country areas:

	Rate per 10,000 population
Sydney/Newcastle/Wollongong	123.3
Rest of state	44.9

Major Theft

This category of offence includes theft of property valued at \$100.00 or more. Again the difference between the rural and urban areas is quite pronounced, with stealing offences in the cities running at almost double the rate for the country:

	Rate per 10,000 population
Sydney/Newcastle/Wollongong	27.7
Rest of state	14.7

Car Theft

Unfortunately, the statistics relating to car theft have not been compiled in a way which enables simple rural-urban comparisons. Instead it is necessary to compare the figures for Sydney with those for the rest of the state (including Newcastle and Wollongong). The latter comparison is extremely favourable to the 'country', the figures indicating that car stealing is five times more prevalent in the Sydney area:

	Rate per 10,000 population
Sydney	63.7
Rest of state (including Newcastle and Wollongong)	12.4

The Three Metropolitan Areas

Sydney, Newcastle & Wollongong

Crime rates for the three major urban areas of New South Wales have been compared. For murder and rape offences, the rates in all areas were comparable except for the low murder rate in Wollongong. The non-metropolitan areas had a comparatively high rate of 'other sexual offences'. Sydney's rate was substantially higher for the remainder of the offence categories.

Although Newcastle has a greater population than Wollongong its crime rate appears marginally lower. Wollongong yields a greater rate on all offences except Murder and Robbery.

Crime Rates, Metropolitan Areas: Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong

	Murder	Rape	Other Sexual Offence	Robbery	Major Assault	Larceny \$100	Breaking Entering
Sydney	0.4	0.5	3.6	4.8	2.0	29.5	132.9
Newcastle	0.4	0.3	3.2	1.2	1.1	15.3	59.6
Wollongong	0.1	0.5	3.5	1.1	1.2	17.1	65.8
Rest of State	0.5	0.4	4.4	0.5	0.8	14.7	44.9

PART II

Sydney's Crime Rate

One way of interpreting the crime level of a city like Sydney is to relate it, where possible, to the level which exists in overseas cities of comparable size.

The accompanying table shows the rates for six types of crime in eight American cities with populations between two and four million people. These figures have been adapted from the 1971 UNIFORM CRIME REPORT and are expressed in the table as rates per 10,000 population:

Crime Rates for Sydney & Eight American Cities (Rates per 10,000 Inhabitants)

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Car Theft
Boston-Lowell-Lawrence (3,402,000)	0.5	1.3	18.6	12.1	125.3	112.0
San Francisco-Oakland (3,101,000)	0.9	3.9	40.3	23.6	224.8	93.6
Washington D.C. (2,907,000)	1.2	3.7	51.0	23.7	133.5	69.8
Baltimore (2,092,000)	1.7	3.4	49.7	38.1	141.5	54.0
Cleveland (2,078,000)	1.5	2.5	31.9	13.5	90.4	123.4
Houston (2,044,000)	1.8	3.2	26.4	19.7	155.5	68.5
Pittsburgh (2,382,000)	0.4	1.8	14.8	11.8	81.4	44.2
St. Louis (2,355,000)	1.3	3.1	26.6	20.4	149.5	75.6
Averages for eight cities	1.2	2.9	32.4	20.4	137.7	81.5
Sydney (2,842,285)	0.3	0.5	4.8	2.1	132.9	63.7

The first thing to note about the foregoing table is that the American cities display considerable variation not only in the overall level of crime but also in the pattern of crime reported in each city. For example, Boston has a below average rate for offences against the person but has comparatively high scores on the car theft and, to a lesser extent, burglary indices.

Washington has almost exactly the opposite pattern. Baltimore on the other hand, has above average rates for everything except car theft.

When Sydney's crime figures are compared with the average for the eight American cities, a fairly clear pattern emerges. Sydney has a much lower rate of offences against the person - approximately four times less homicide, six times less rape, seven times less robbery and almost 10 times fewer assaults (see technical note Appendix A). However, Sydney's burglary rate (breaking and entering and associated offences) was only fractionally better than the average for the eight American cities.

Sydney's car stealing rate of 63.7 per 10,000 population was approximately three-quarters of the eight city average but Pittsburg, Baltimore, Houston and Washington all reported rates of less than 70 per 10,000 inhabitants.*

Clearly Sydney's rate of property offences more closely approximated the American pattern than was the case with so-called 'street offences' and offences against the person.

*The latest American figures show that there are 2.5 persons for every private motor vehicle. In July, 1972 there were an estimated 3.7 persons for every motor vehicle in New South Wales.

Canadian Comparison

The latest Canadian figures available to us are for 1969. Montreal and Toronto are the two Canadian cities with approximately the same population as that of Sydney. Generally the crime rate in Toronto is less than that of Montreal.

Crime Rates for Sydney & Two Canadian Cities (Rates per 10,000 Inhabitants)

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Burglary	Car Theft
Montreal (est. 1969 pop., 2,557,683)	0.4	0.4	13.0	89.1	41.6
Toronto (est. 1969 pop., 2,265,557)	0.2	0.4	5.7	60.9	34.5
Sydney	0.3	0.5	4.8	132.9	63.7

Five of the index crimes are able to be compared with the Sydney figures. The rates of homicide and rape are comparable in Sydney and the Canadian cities while Montreal's robbery rate is much higher. For the property offences, burglary and car theft, the Sydney rate is substantially greater.

Newcastle, Wollongong & US Cities

The accompanying tables summarise the comparisons of Newcastle and Wollongong with American cities of similar size. The rates in the two groups of American cities vary only slightly on the four index crimes it has been possible to include. The differences between these cities and their New South Wales 'counterparts' is quite marked even for the offence of burglary where the American rates are 1.8 and 1.6 times greater than those in Newcastle and Wollongong.

Wollongong & 33 U S Cities, Population 150,000-200,000

Rate per 10,000 inhabitants

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Burglary
33 U.S. cities	0.8	1.9	9.5	109.9
Wollongong	0.1	0.5	1.1	65.8

NEWCASTLE AND 26 U.S. CITIES, POPULATION 250,000 - 300,000

Rate per 10,000 inhabitants

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Burglary
26 U.S. cities	0.8	1.8	9.3	107.8
Newcastle	0.4	0.3	1.2	59.6

APPENDIX A

Assault Offences - Technical Note

Comparison of Sydney and American cities in this category of offence is made difficult by problems of definition. The F.B.I. major crime index reports rates for "Aggravated Assault". This offence is defined as an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe bodily injury. The attack is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or other means likely to produce death or serious bodily harm. The definition includes attempts to commit this crime. The Bureau's treatment of New South Wales Police offence statistics classifies 'Major Assault' in a way which includes assault occasioning actual bodily harm, causing grievous bodily harm, malicious wounding, and shoot to cause grievous bodily harm. A second category of 'Minor Assault' involving assault of children, police and females as well as common assault, is excluded from the comparison with 'aggravated assault' because it does not match the violent offences reported under 'Aggravated Assault'.

The average rate per 10,000 population reported in the eight American cities is 20.4. This is 9.7 times as great as the Sydney rate of 2.1 per 10,000 for Major Assault.

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