

National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime

Companion Volume to Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003

Part Two: Impact on individual police forces

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Preface

Variation in recording practices has long frustrated attempts to compare accurately the level of crime between different police forces. This variation has also obstructed efforts to understand how police forces can best respond to crime problems and demonstrate their effectiveness to the people they serve.

The National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) was adopted by all police forces in England and Wales in April 2002 (some had adopted the Standard earlier) in an effort to improve the consistency of police recording and to better reflect the demands made on the police by victims of crime. In most cases, this necessitated a move to a more victim-focused approach to crime recording based on the victim's perception of a crime taking place, rather than an evidential approach based on the police obtaining evidence of a crime occurring. The result has, in many cases, been an increase in recorded crime in 2002/03 over and above that attributable to a real increase in crime.

This report is the second part of the Home Office summary of the impact of the NCRS in England and Wales in 2002/03. Part One provides the full details of the background, methodology, national findings and the conclusions (available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/rdsolr3103.pdf>). This part provides a summary of the NCRS impact on each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales.

Whilst it has not been possible to estimate precisely what the NCRS effect has been for all forces (in some cases the national methodology could not be used), the information contained in this section provides an insight into how the NCRS has affected local crime trends. Together with forces' own analyses, this report should allow forces to present a better informed account of crime occurring in 2002/03 to their local populations.

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Introduction

This is the second part of the Home Office report on the impact of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in England and Wales in 2002/03. This part of the report provides details of how the NCRS has affected the level of recorded crime in each police force in England and Wales. It draws primarily upon findings from the methodology agreed between police forces' representatives at the National Crime Recording Steering Group. The summaries also refer to internal force analyses where appropriate. A brief overview of the background and method is provided below – for a fuller account of each, refer to Part One of the report.

BACKGROUND

All police forces in England and Wales adopted the NCRS in April 2002, although a few had moved in this direction prior to this date. The NCRS was developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), with assistance from the Home Office, following the investigations into crime recording variation by ACPO, the Home Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC). Variation in recording practices had made comparisons between police forces and, indeed, national estimates of the level of recorded crime, difficult to measure accurately.

The NCRS aims:

- To promote greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime.
- To take a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording.

The focus of the NCRS has been to harmonise police forces' approaches to crime recording in order to improve confidence in the recorded crime statistics and to enable a more robust comparison of police performance to be undertaken. The implementation of a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording will also provide a better measure of the service demanded from the police, and aims to promote public confidence in the police service as a whole.

For many police forces, the introduction of the NCRS required a move to a more victim-focused approach to crime recording, that is recording based more on the victim's perception of a crime occurring rather than the police satisfying themselves that a crime had indeed taken place. Although a shift towards this prima facie approach to crime recording had been occurring in an ad hoc way in a number of forces prior to the universal adoption of the NCRS, the Standard served to formalise this process nationally. In doing so, it was not intended that police forces should trawl for all potential criminal activity that occurs and thereby record this as crime, but rather focus on the demands being placed upon them by victims and to ensure these were recorded in a consistent manner.

It was anticipated that such a move would result in more crimes being recorded than would have been the case had the NCRS not been introduced. The Home Office has therefore estimated the extent to which the introduction of the new recording Standard has impacted upon the recorded crime statistics in 2002/03 in order to provide a balanced interpretation of the real trends in crime in England and Wales and for individual police force areas.

METHOD

Part One gives the full details of the methodology used to estimate the impact of the NCRS. In brief, the number of recorded crimes was compared to the number of crime-related incidents in the following categories:

- Violence against the person
- Burglary dwelling
- Robbery
- All theft
- Total crime

Crime-related incidents have been taken as the most reliable measure of the 'real' changes in crime, on the assumption that the propensity of the public to report crimes should remain reasonably constant over time. Any change in the ratio of crimes to crime-related incidents has been assumed to signify a NCRS effect.

This method has not been able to estimate the impact of the NCRS in every force, particularly where changes to the incident count, either as a result of implementing the NCRS or other reasons, made the measure of incidents unstable over the monitoring period. However, the methodology has enabled the Home Office to make national estimates for the impact of the NCRS and has helped interpret the impact in over half of the 43 forces in England and Wales. In other forces, a more traditional analysis of crime trends or other alternative methods have had to be adopted.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FORCE VARIATION

Just as the NCRS has impacted on individual offence categories in different ways, so too has it affected to varying degrees the level of crime recorded in different police force areas. Whilst not exhaustive, a number of factors are likely to have accounted for at least some of the variation in the NCRS impact between different police forces:

Different starting points

Whilst the NCRS was officially implemented in all forces in England and Wales in April 2002, some forces began recording crime in line with the principles of the NCRS prior to this date. Details are given in the individual force summaries. Different police forces have also had to move from different points along the prima facie/evidential continuum to meet the objectives of the NCRS.

Recording systems

The variation in recording practices – both for incidents and crimes – amongst police forces in England and Wales has been well documented (see, for example, HMIC, 2000; Burrows et al., 2000). Just as recording practices have affected the proportion of incidents recorded as crimes, so too will the variation have impacted on the extent of the NCRS effect in each force. Particular areas of variation include:

- **Structural and procedural changes**

Forces operate very different systems for receiving calls from the public, assigning police resources and, if appropriate, recording crimes (see Diez, 1995; HMIC, 2000). Some systems are locally operated at Basic Command Unit (BCU) level, others are centralised. Forces have different mixes of police and civilian staff undertaking these functions. Forces which have changed their call handling procedures and /or IT systems prior to or during the monitoring period are likely to have disrupted the ratio of crimes to incidents.

- **Opening/closing codes**

It is standard practice for most police forces to assign an 'opening code' to each incident which reflects the initial perception of the nature of the allegation made. When more information has been collected and the nature of the incident is fully understood, a 'closing code' will normally be assigned reflecting the true nature of the allegation. It is therefore possible for a 'closing code' to be different to an 'opening code'. Forces' incident counts can be derived from either opening or closing codes. If an incident is classified more towards the end of this process, and if that classification tends to mirror the final crime classification, then this will compromise the basis for using incidents as a comparator for recorded crime trends.

- **Make-up of incident counts**

There is variation amongst police forces in what is included within their incident counts. Whilst all forces include 999 calls, some do not count non-emergency calls for service or in-person ('over the counter') reports.

Other police activity

Numerous macro-policing factors may have impacted upon the consistency of trends in recorded crimes and incidents within a police force area, for example, changes to area boundaries, changes to police numbers, commencement or cessation of reporting initiatives etc.

Small numbers of crimes/incidents

The size of some forces is likely to dictate that, for some offence categories, the number of crimes and/or incidents recorded is relatively small (for example robbery and sexual offences). In these cases, small fluctuations in a force's incident count or crime count can result in disproportionately large changes to the ratio of crimes to incidents and can therefore produce unexpected and improbable NCRS effects.

INTERPRETING THE FORCE SUMMARIES

Each summary that follows contains information for each police force area:

- a table of the quarterly and full-year estimates of the NCRS impact for 2002/03 (where available);
- general information about the implementation of the NCRS in each force followed by commentary on the NCRS effect for the offences of violence against the person, burglary dwelling (or all burglary), robbery, all theft and total crime; and
- five charts for the offences detailed above (these are shown on the right-hand page).

An example key chart with explanatory labels for the different elements which comprise each chart is shown on page 5.

Negative impacts

In some instances, the national methodology has produced a negative NCRS estimate. Reasons for this could be that:

- a force was previously over-recording crimes (i.e. adopting the NCRS required a move away from a more prima facie approach to crime recording in order to bring the force into line with the agreed national standard);
- if incident levels were affected by the introduction of the NCRS then this could lead to an underestimate of the impact and sometimes even a negative estimate; or
- small numbers of crimes in certain categories in small forces can cause fluctuation in the data resulting in apparent negative impacts.

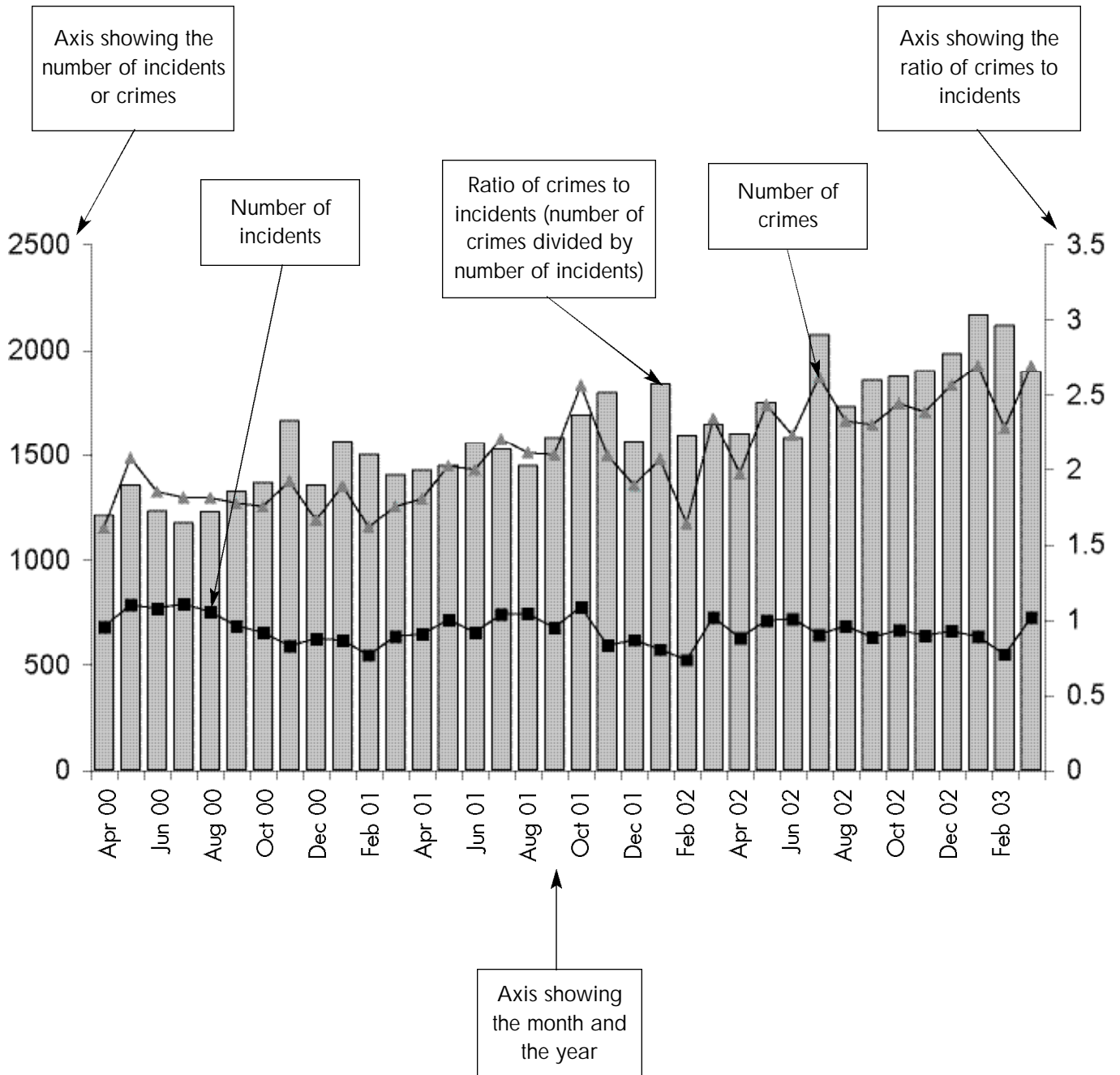
Negative impacts, if sustained and significant, might also be an indication of a reduction in recording in a force which should be queried by Force Crime Registrars and auditors.

IMPORTANT

Please note that:

- 1. Forces are not included or excluded from the national estimates owing to the quality of their crime recording, but are included on the basis that the relationship between incidents and crimes is such that it appears consistent enough to be a measure of the NCRS impact.**
- 2. The figures in this report use the national methodology to calculate estimates of the impact of recording changes owing to the NCRS. These estimates are not intended to provide a precise adjustment for the number of recorded crimes but rather to indicate the broad impact both relative to other crime types and also other forces or the national average.**
- 3. The national methodology has been used to calculate estimates for the NCRS impact on particular crime types in forces for the year 2002/03. This year represents the first full year following the national implementation of the NCRS. However, a number of forces implemented the NCRS, or the underlying principles of the NCRS, in earlier years and therefore the estimates will not reflect the full impact of these changes for these forces. Where possible, estimates of the NCRS impact in earlier years for these forces have also been provided in the commentary for these forces.**

Key to charts



Note:

The impact of recording changes should be visible as an increase in the ratio of crimes to incidents (i.e. the vertical bars). The right-hand axis is not to the same scale for each offence or police force and therefore readers should note carefully the actual change in the ratio that is being shown. The percentage NCRS impact equates to the percentage change in this ratio, not the absolute change.

References

Burrows, J., Tarling, R., Mackie, A., Lewis, R. and Taylor, G. (2000) Review of police forces' crime recording practices. Home Office Research Study 204. London: Home Office.

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