

New Zealand Crime & Safety Survey 2006 (NZCASS) Key Findings report

News media fact sheet 2: Crime in 2005

1 How much crime was there?

Although a third of offences were judged to be serious by victims, their understanding of what constituted a 'crime' was often quite different from legal definitions.

1,101,000 (40%) criminal offences were not considered to be a crime by the victim, despite meeting the legal definitions of criminal offences.

There were an estimated 2.75 million attempted and actual personal and household offences experienced by those aged 15 years or over. Of these:

1,814,000 were personal offences (56 offences per 100 adults)

939,000 were household offences (60 offences per 100 households).

The offences that occurred included:

- 720,000 assaults half of which involved injury
- 601,000 threats
- 330,000 burglaries (new legislative definition)
- 233,000 household vandalisms
- 208,000 sexual offences
- 146,000 theft of, from, or interference with, vehicles
- 138,000 vehicle vandalisms

The number of personal offences such as assaults and threats is higher than the number of burglaries (a household crime) for instance since there are more adults than households.

2 What about threats and assaults?

Understanding the incidence of threats and assaults requires further in-depth analysis, particularly in respect to family violence, for which a follow-up study is already planned. There are several contributing factors for the rates of assaults and threats registered by the NZCASS. These may be:

- the way that the NZCASS asks about threats and assaults helps respondents to report these incidents more effectively in the interview than the methods used by other crime surveys internationally, and
- the number of serious crimes is relatively small, so respondents are more likely to remember more minor incidents when they are specifically asked to tell interviewers about such offences.

3 What about violent crime?

The NZCASS did not identify an increase in violent crime. Several changes were made to the methodology in 2006 that would have had the effect of increasing the number of assaults, threats and sexual offences recorded. However these increases reflect the changes in the methodology, rather than any real change in the level of victimisation.

The coding of offences had the effect of reducing the number of uncoded offences from previous surveys, because more verification checks were built into the questionnaire. For example, there were changes to the way information from respondents' answers were used to code offences. The count of threats and assaults were affected in this way.

There were also changes to the screener questions on threats in 2006. In effect, there were additional questions distinguishing threats of force, and threats to damage personal property. This would have promoted recall of more incidents.

The approach to measuring sexual victimisation was changed in the 2006 survey and this has produced a higher number of sexual offences than the two previous surveys. There were four screener questions relating to sexual offences, whereas in the 2001 survey there was just one.

4 Was there more or less crime than in other similar countries?

It is not possible to say. It has long been recognised that Police statistics in different countries cannot be compared because of differences in definitions of offences and how the Police record them. By the same token, surveys in different countries use different procedures. The way that the NZCASS was designed compared to crime surveys in other countries means that it produces a higher count of interpersonal crime, so we can't compare New Zealand with the findings from those surveys.

One way that we can make international comparisons is by looking at the findings of the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) findings, which are due to be released shortly.

Note that it is not possible, either, to compare the NZCASS with the ICVS, because they both use very different methods and questions. These differences need to be taken into consideration when making international comparisons.

5 Was there more or less crime in Auckland than elsewhere in NZ?

There were higher risks in Auckland for burglary and vehicle offences. But risks for other offences were not dissimilar to other areas of New Zealand.

6 How serious did victims think a crime was?

An important new feature of the NZCASS was the inclusion of new questions on victims' perceptions of the seriousness of offences.

Of all offences recorded in the survey, 38% were considered 'most serious' by their victim, 27% considered 'fairly serious' and 34% 'least serious'.

Thefts of vehicles most often fell into the 'most serious' band (55%), then sexual offences, assaults, threats, robbery and theft from the person, and burglary.

Of those who experienced offences in 2005, 40% did not consider the offence to have been a crime, despite the incident meeting the legal definition of a criminal offence. Of these, half felt that what happened was 'wrong but not a crime' and another half felt it was 'just something that happens'.

The sexual offences measured were most likely to be thought of as not being crimes (60%)—as were most threats (57%) and assaults (53%). However, many victims still considered that what had occurred was serious, even if it was not considered to be a crime.

Conversely, thefts and vandalism were not often given high seriousness scores, yet were more often seen as criminal. Vehicle thefts were most likely to be thought of as being both serious and criminal. Thefts of personal property were seen as less serious and less likely to be considered a crime than the average.

7 What is the 'dark figure' of crime?

The term 'dark figure' of crime refers to crime that occurs outside the count of official Police statistics. The 'dark figure' is made up of crimes that are not reported to the Police, and crimes that are not recorded by the Police.

The NZCASS found that victims reported 32% of all offences that were measured by the survey. Victims were more likely to report offences which they considered to be serious or criminal, and those which were linked to insurance claims.

It is very difficult to compare Police figures with NZCASS figures, because the Police record crimes against children and commercial properties, and a number of other crimes that cannot be measured by NZCASS.

The researchers used an adjusted set of Police figures that could be matched to the NZCASS offences. The results showed that Police recorded just 27% of the offences that NZCASS said had been reported to Police.

Using the amount of crime recorded by Police and the amount of crime measured by the NZCASS, it is possible to estimate that the actual amount of crime that takes place in any year is about eight times more than the official Police Crime Statistics. However, there will not be eight times as many crimes of the same severity as measured in the Police Crime Statistics.