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Trends in Serious Crime in N.S.W.

INTRODUCTION

Few subjects attract as much interest, or sometimes as much concern as trends in criminal activity. We regularly read media reports purporting to show a sudden 'upsurge' in crime. Sometimes we are left with a feeling that we are about to be engulfed by some terrible surge in criminal activity. This is well illustrated by a recent report in a Sydney newspaper which proclaimed that the crime rate had 'soared' to 1,039 a day and quoted politicians saying that the crime rate was 'out of control' and that law and order in New South Wales was in a 'shambles' (1).

Reports of changes in crime, however, rarely explain the complications which often lie behind the bare statistics on 'reported offences'. Take drug offences, for example. When police record an increase in the numbers of drug offences can we assume that the number of people committing drug offences is increasing? The answer is 'no', at least not without more information.

Drug offences are rarely reported to the police for obvious reasons (those committing them aren't likely to admit them unless caught). So the number of reported offences is mostly a matter of the number of people arrested for drug offences. If we increase the number of police we are likely to increase the number of arrests. Thus a simple increase in the number of arrests for drug offences may not mean there are more offenders. It may mean there are more police.

Another important factor in interpreting crime statistics relates to certain offences which became known only because they are reported. These include offences such as robbery or burglary (i.e. break, enter and steal). Changes in the rates of reported robberies or burglaries may come about because more of them are being committed. But they may also come about because people become more (or less) willing to report them.

Over the last ten years there have been large increases, for example, in the number of reported sexual offences. This may have been because more of them were being committed. But it is more likely that most of the increase has occurred because victims are more willing to report these offences to the police. The reasons for this greater willingness are complex, but two important reasons are that there are now a number of sexual assault support centres and there has been some easing of the position of the victim in the court process (2).

Under the *Offences in Public Places Act* the police have a power to arrest a person for "offensive behaviour" (3). Just what constitutes "offensive behaviour" is broadly defined in the legislation, though the courts have laid down some rules in individual cases. The result of this is that, within certain limits, the police have a discretion as to just what activities to call offensive behaviour.

What does this mean for crime statistics? If we see increases in the rates of arrests for "offensive behaviour" we cannot simply assume

that the same kinds of offensive things are being done more frequently. There is always the possibility that the police have changed their criteria for offensive behaviour. If these criteria are broader more offences will be recorded, even though the activities people may be engaging in are unchanged.

This description of police discretion in judging what constitutes an offence has a counterpart in the way police classify offences for statistical purposes. Once again this is best illustrated by way of example.

In 1981 the law affecting sexual assault was widened in an important way. Before 1981 the behaviour we understand as rape had to involve sexual intercourse without the consent of the victim. Yet there were many occasions when sexual assault occurred without sexual intercourse. These behaviours sometimes led to charges of attempted rape, sometimes to charges of indecent assault and sometimes just to charges of assault.

The new law defines as sexual assault many of those behaviours originally called attempted rape, indecent assault or just assault. These behaviours might all still be grouped under the heading of 'sexual assaults' or 'sex offences' by police but the behaviours being grouped under these headings have changed in important ways since 1981. For this reason we must be cautious in interpreting changes in reported sex offences before and after that year.

What is true of sexual offences may be true of others. The general point to

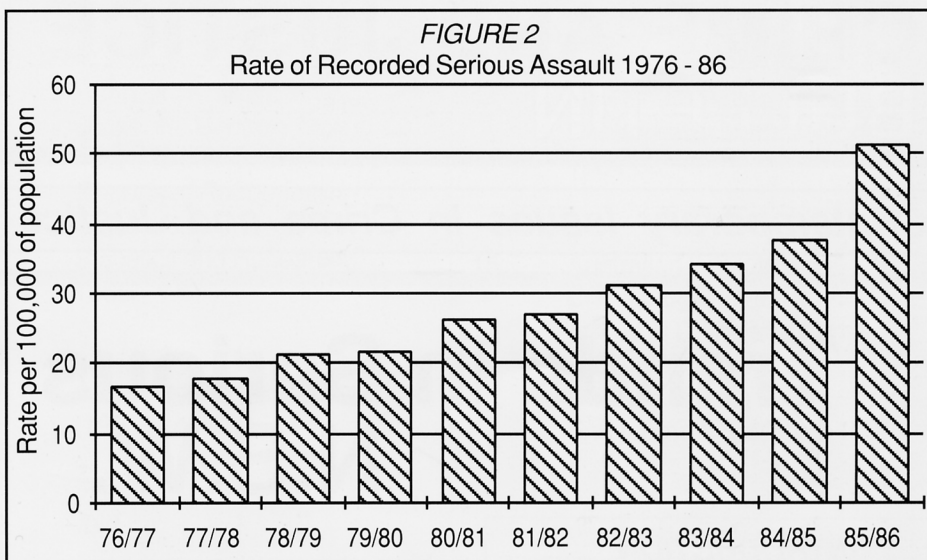
bear in mind is that the police must make a decision as to how to classify and offence and that decision will affect measured rates of offences regardless of any changes in community behaviour.

These considerations make it obvious that crime statistics by themselves are not terribly useful. We need the right information (relating to other important factors) in order to make them useful. With this information though, we are often able to observe interesting trends in the pattern of crime. In the ensuing sections we will identify some of the major trends in New South Wales over the period 1976/77 to 1985/86. Much of what follows is drawn from the Australian Institute of Criminology publication *The Size of the Crime Problem in Australia*. Readers especially interested in this topic are referred to this useful and readable publication for further details.

Murder

Murder is unusual in that very few murders go unreported and there is little latitude in most cases for police discretion. For this reason the recorded murder rate is a fairly accurate measure of the actual rate of persons intentionally killed. Figure 1 shows that the murder rate in New South Wales has remained remarkably stable at between 1.7 and about 2.1 per 100,000 of population. In terms of frequency this is about 100 murders per annum.

Nevertheless there are obvious annual fluctuations in the rate, perhaps the most pronounced being in 1981/82. Because the number of murders is fairly small (compared to



other offences), single episodes in which a large number of people are killed can have a significant impact on the murder rate for that year. This factor is important when considering the contribution of family murder-suicides, for example, to the overall murder rate.

Most murders occur in the home and are the outcome of, or are related to, domestic disputes. Fifty-four percent of homicides actually occur in the home of the victim or the offender (5). Forty-three percent of homicides occur within the family of the offender; a further twenty percent occur among friends or acquaintances. The rate of homicides involving complete strangers is only eighteen percent (6).

Serious Assault

Unlike murder, the recorded rate of serious assaults in New South Wales has been steadily increasing over the period 1976/77 to 1985/86(7).

The rate has more than doubled over this period. It is unlikely that a large portion of this increase is attributable to changes in the willingness of people to report this offence. There has been some increase in the willingness of victims of domestic violence to report assaults to police but such reports rarely fall within the category of serious assault.

Some of the increase may be due to a rise over the period 1971 to 1986 in the percentage of N.S.W. population aged 25 to 29 (8). This age group accounts for a high proportion of serious assaults. The rapid growth in youth unemployment may also have exacerbated the effect of changes to the age profile of the community. Neither of these factors however, explains the size of the increase, nor can it be accounted for in terms of changes to public reporting practices or police prosecution practices. The explanation for the trend depicted in Figure 2 must await the outcome of further research.

Sexual Assault

As indicated earlier, rates of sexual assault are heavily affected by changes in the willingness of victims to report the offence. Traditionally victims of sexual assault have been reluctant to report being assaulted because of the stigma which attaches to the offence (for the victim) and because of the often highly traumatic effect of giving evidence against an accused at trial.

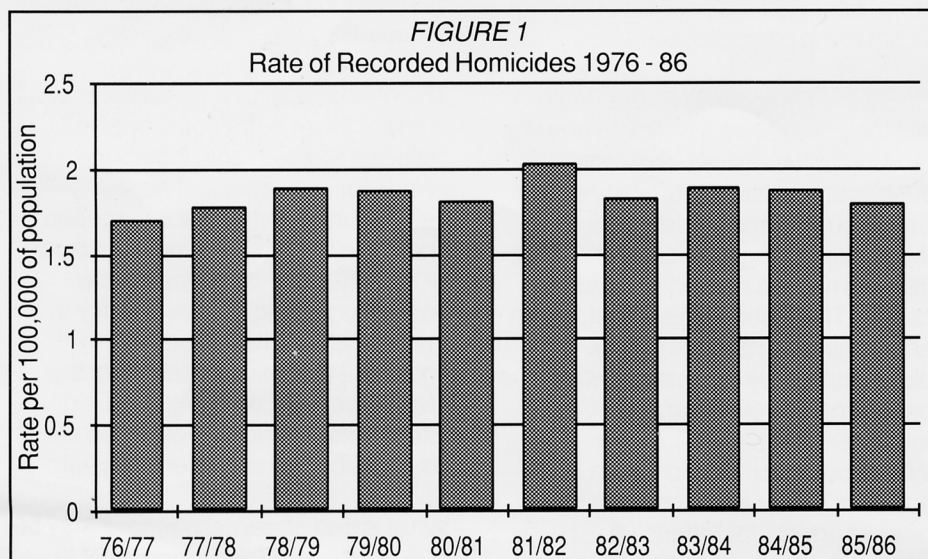
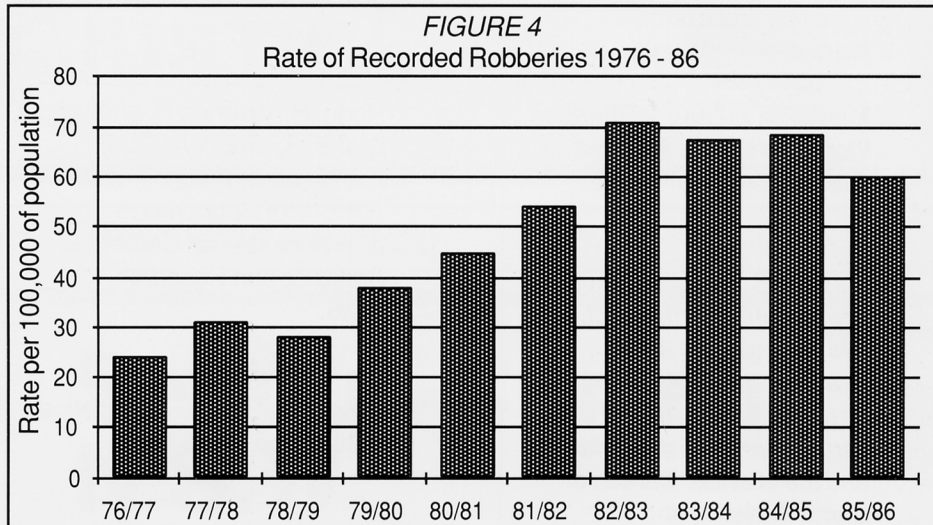


Figure 3 suggests some variability but little nett increase in rates of recorded sexual assault over the period 1982/83 to 1985/86 (rates prior to 1982/83 are not comparable with those from 1982/83 on because the law affecting sexual assault was significantly altered in 1981). It is likely, though, that the actual rate of sexual assault is some three to four times higher than the recorded rate because of victim reluctance to report the offence (9).

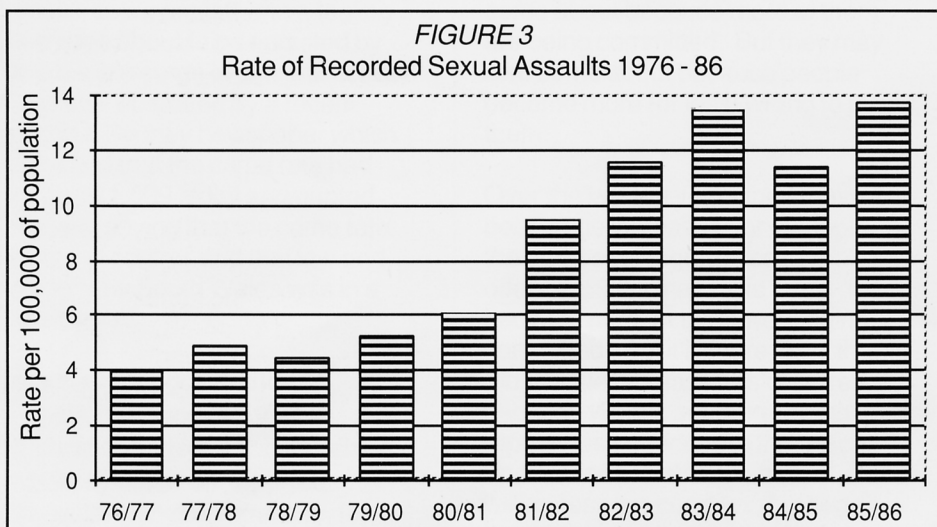
As with homicide and other serious assaults, a very high percentage (35% - 41%) are friends or acquaintances of the offender. One recent study also found that at least 53 percent of sexual assault victims were assaulted in their own home (10). This is a result similar to that found in connection with homicide. Both figures show the importance of victim-offender relationships in understanding the offence.



actual increase is of the order suggested by Figure 4.

Why the rate of reported robberies should have increased is difficult to say. The vast majority of robberies in New South Wales occur in the metropolitan areas, particularly in inner

some of the increase may be related to increases in the number of persons resorting to crime to obtain money to purchase heroin. Increases in the level of unemployment might also play a part, especially as a significant proportion of these offences are committed by juveniles.



Break Enter & Steal

As with robbery, there was a marked increase in the rate of reported break and entry into dwellings over the period 1976/77 to 1983/84. The decrease in the rate of reported break and enters since 1983/84 is also notable. Figure 5 shows that since 1983/84 there has been a decrease in the rate from 1290.6 per 100,000 of population to 955.5 in 1985/86. A substantial proportion (38.7% in 1984/85) of these offences were committed by juveniles.

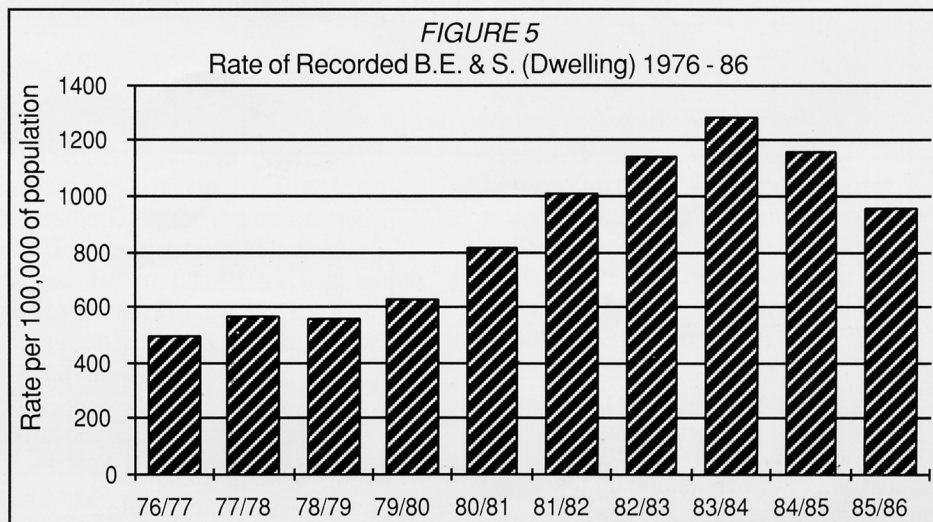
It is unlikely that this decrease is solely attributable to changes in the willingness of people to report this offence. Crime victim surveys

Robbery

The offence of robbery occurs when property is taken from a person by force. Figure 4 shows the change in the rate of reported robberies over the period 1976/77 to 1985/86. The rate nearly tripled in the period up to 1982/83 but has declined slightly since that year. The current rate represents some 900 reported robberies per year in New South Wales.

The actual rate of robbery is likely to be somewhat higher than this but there is no reason for suspecting large changes in the willingness of victims to report robberies. Thus, even if the figure of 900 understates the actual number of robberies, it is likely that the

suburbs such as Darlinghurst and Kings Cross (11). This suggests that

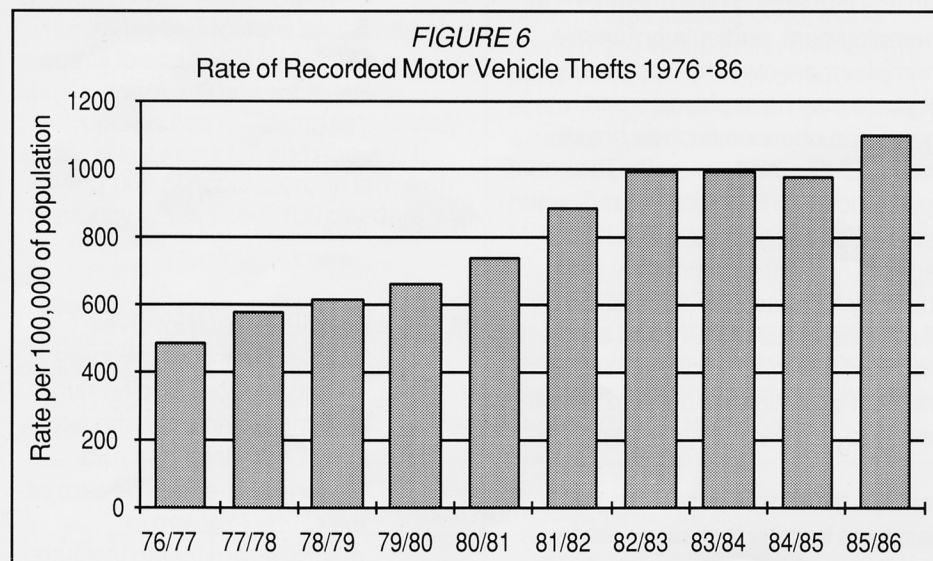


highlight the fact that a large proportion of break and enters are reported to police second only to motor vehicle theft (12). Insurance obligations ensure that most cases of break, enter and steal are reported.

Decreases in the rate of reported break and enters may be attributable to two phenomena: firstly, the introduction of Neighbourhood Watch, a community-based crime prevention programme directed primarily to reducing the incidence of burglary in residential areas; secondly, the deterrence created by the response of people to the increasing need to secure homes adequately in order to fulfil insurance requirements.

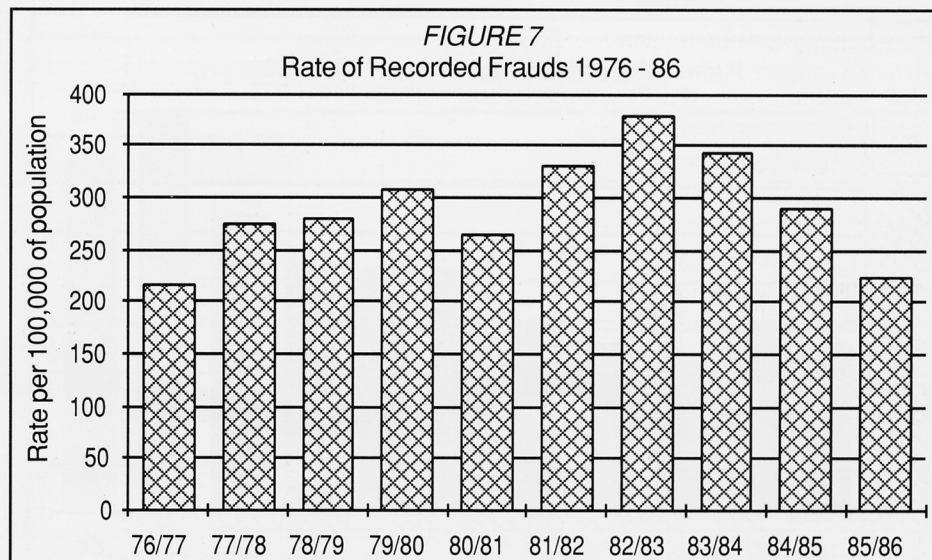
Motor Vehicle Theft

Figure 6 shows the change in the rate of reported motor vehicle thefts over the period 1976/77 to 1985/86. The rate has steadily increased since 1976/77. The current rate represents some 60,831 motor vehicle (and a small number of motor lorry, caravan and trailer) thefts per year in New South Wales. Almost half of these offences (44% in 1984/85) were committed by juveniles.



As already stated, a majority of motor vehicle thefts are reported to the police: the 1983 crime victim survey found that of those persons who had a motor vehicle stolen, 94% reported the theft to the police (13). Obviously like break, enter and steal, the inclination to report motor vehicle theft is closely linked to insurance claim requirements.

In recent years, the percentage of motor vehicle thefts cleared by the police has been stable at a low 7



percent. The percentage of these offences cleared does not paint a complete picture of losses incurred through this offence. The great majority of motor vehicles stolen are recovered. In 1985/86, of the 60,831 vehicles stolen in New South Wales, 50,486 (or 83 percent) were recovered.

Fraud

Fraud offences represent a set of illegal acts committed or attempted

offences involving false pretences or deception and not corporate offences. These include, among other things, credit card fraud, social security fraud, and the changing price labels in shops. The under-representation of corporate offences and offences involving misappropriation reported to the police is most likely to be the result of difficulties in the detection of these offences.

Drug Offences

As indicated earlier, drug offences are rarely reported to the police. The number of recorded offences is mostly a matter of the number of people arrested for drug offences. Unsurprisingly, in 1985/86, approximately 97 percent of recorded offences were cleared.

Although comparing calendar years to financial years, Figure 8 shows that the rate of recorded drug offences has doubled since 1978 with a slight decline in 1985/86. The current rate represents some 20,863 recorded drug offences per year in New South Wales. The majority of offences recorded are for obtaining drugs unlawfully (43 percent) and use drugs (29 percent). The highest rate for drug offences (2592.75 per 100,000 of population) is recorded in Inner-city Sydney, that is the Kings Cross/Darlinghurst area. A small residential population and a high transient population are responsible for the high rate experienced in this area.

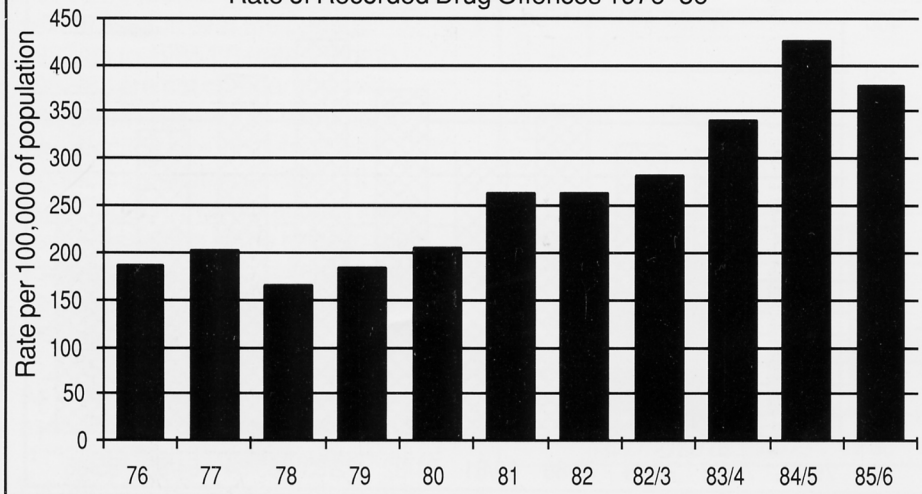
The increase in the number of recorded drug offences may reflect a change in policing practices, an

involving deception, misappropriation, forgery and uttering etc. Figure 7 shows the rate of recorded frauds for the period 1976/77 to 1985/86. Trends in fraud offences reported to police are erratic, to say the least. The rate of recorded frauds peaked in 1982/83 at a level of 379.6 per 100,000 of population and returned to 224 in 1985/86, a rate similar to that recorded in 1976/77.

The majority of fraud offences represented by the current rate are for

FIGURE 8

Rate of Recorded Drug Offences 1976 -86



increase in the number of drug offences or both. With the establishment of the Drug Law Enforcement Bureau in December 1984 and the addition of 46 officers involved in drug law-enforcement (a total of 152), there was a substantial increase in the number of charges laid for drug offences. In the 6 months preceding the Bureau's establishment, 2,069 charges were laid by the Drug Squad, compared with 3,809 laid in the 6 months following its establishment (14). This represented an 84 percent increase in the number of charges laid for drug offences over a twelve month period.

Concern for drug offences in the community focusses largely on the supply and use of heroin. Whilst not wishing to under play the seriousness of heroin offences, it is important to recognise that sixty percent of recorded drug offences involve marijuana.

CONCLUSION

The picture just presented, despite the difficulties already outlined in the interpretation of recorded offence statistics, suggests a pattern of increasing rates of (non-sexual) assault, break, enter and steal, robbery and car theft. There has been some decrease in the rates of robbery and break, enter and steal in the last three years but the levels of these offences are still noticeably higher than they were ten years ago. The

rate of arrests for drug offences has also risen sharply but the increase may be due in some measure to increased law-enforcement activity as well as increased rates of offending.

These changes are not unique to New South Wales, though they are somewhat more pronounced in this State than in others. The reasons for the changes are as easy to speculate upon as they are difficult to establish with any certainty. Rapid increases in unemployment, particularly juvenile unemployment over the past five or six years may have played a part in changes in offences such as break, enter and steal and car theft. The steady increase in opiate-related deaths also suggests a rise in heroin dependency in the community (15). This may have accelerated rates of offences such as robbery and break, enter and steal since these offences are often committed in order to obtain money to purchase illegal drugs.

Perhaps the most inexplicable yet disturbing trend is that associated with the offence of assault, reports of which have more than doubled over the last ten years. The policy implications of this finding will remain unclear until more is known about the factors associated with the increase. In particular, we need to establish to what extent the change is due to changes in rates of domestic violence as against violence committed in the form of unprovoked attacks on people in public places.

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